

## **The captivating magic of fandoms**

A qualitative study about long-term fan engagement with the Harry Potter franchise

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Abstract

Both the *Harry Potter* books and the film adaptations remain popular to this day, despite the release of the first book in 2001 and the last film in 2011. The reunion of the original cast in January 2022 for the twentieth anniversary of the first film, as well as the release of the third installment of *Fantastic Beasts*, the film series telling the stories before *Harry Potter*, underscore the franchise's longevity and enduring popularity. This research aims to understand this long-term fan engagement by considering the following research question: *How do fans give meaning to their long-term commitment to the Harry Potter franchise?* By conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews with twelve fans of the franchise and conducting a subsequent analysis of the interviews using a thematic content analysis, valuable insights relevant to answering the research question were obtained. An important finding was the continuity of the participants' attachment to *Harry Potter*. This was explained by the strong and long-term commitment to the series, as all participants first encountered the series as children. Because of this long attachment, the fandom influenced the participants' identities by, for example, shaping certain character traits such as imagination and creativity. Furthermore, influences of fandom on the life course, such as inspiration for participants' careers, were observed. In addition, due their long-term engagement, changes and influences on the participants' fandom, such as time constraints as adults, negative experiences, including being judged for their fandom, but also positive influences, such as increased exposure due to digitization, were observed. Moreover, participants attributed a comforting role to *Harry Potter* in their lives, allowing them to escape from their everyday lives and stress. This finding led to marketing implications as participants emphasized the relevance of closely related activities and merchandise to further immerse themselves in the world. Additionally, participants feel very protective of *Harry Potter* due to their long and emotional attachment to it, especially regarding new releases and marketing activities. Therefore, when planning future marketing activities, attention should be paid to ensuring a close connection to the original series. Aside from these practical implications for marketing, the research also offered theoretical implications, for example, in relation to cyclical fan engagement, highlighting that while fans may experience more and less intense periods of engagement, they do not fully exhaust the fan object to move on to another.

**KEYWORDS:** *Fan studies, long-term engagement, life course fandom, cyclical fandom, Harry Potter*

[Preface]

The following master's thesis "The captivating magic of fandoms: A qualitative study about long-term fan engagement with the *Harry Potter* franchise" was written as part of the master's program "Media & Creative Industries" at the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam for the completion of the corresponding master's degree.

The topic of this thesis was chosen out of a strong personal interest in fandom, as I myself was a fan of various fan objects in my adolescence. But in contrast to my personal experiences of only temporarily being a fan of something, in this thesis I wanted to investigate why some people remain fans of something in the long run, something I frequently noticed regarding the *Harry Potter* fandom even prior to this thesis. As a result, the exploration of long-term fan engagement in this thesis relates specifically to *Harry Potter*.

First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Simone Driessen, for her guidance and support as I worked on this thesis. I would also like to thank all my interview participants for allowing me to learn about their fan engagement and for sharing valuable insights into their long-term commitment to *Harry Potter*. Without their enthusiastic cooperation, I would not have been able to conduct this research. I would also like to thank my friends and fellow students. Studying together with you has inspired and motivated me and helped me to stay on top of my work.

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I hope you enjoy reading this thesis.

Henriette Nöthel

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## **1 Introduction**

The *Harry Potter* series remains one of the most successful to this day. Not only have the original books by author J.K. Rowling been an international success, with more than 500 million books sold worldwide and translations into 80 languages (Wizards World, 2018), but so have the film adaptations, grossing a record \$1.342 billion for the last of the eight films, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part II* (Mendelson, 2020). Although the first book was released in 2001 and the final film concluding the series was released in 2011, the series is still relevant today. There are numerous play or theater adaptations, as well as theme parks and “fan participation activities”, such as Quidditch tournaments, the fictional magical sport Rowling invented in the books (Tribe et al., 2021, p. 1). In 2016, the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* was released and immediately sold out, with fans of different ages and generations lining up outside the stores (Ross, 2016). In addition, the new film series, *Fantastic Beasts*, chronicling the storylines before *Harry Potter*, was introduced in 2016 with the third installment released in 2022 (Davies, 2021). The reunion of the original cast in January 2022 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the first film underscores how long the franchise has been around as well as its enduring popularity.

In the ongoing success of the series, fans play a critical role. Fan activities such as the creation of fan websites where theories can be discussed, as for example MuggleNet.com, or the writing of fan fictions keep the *Harry Potter* phenomenon alive. The aim of this study is to understand why fans remain loyal for so long. The research question is therefore formulated as follows: *How do fans give meaning to their long-term commitment to the Harry Potter franchise?*

### **1.1 Relevance of the research**

Research on this franchise is of great relevance, as the *Harry Potter* fandom includes not only those who were children when the books were published, but also fans who were not yet born at that time, for example. Consequently, this fandom encompasses different generations (Ross, 2016). While much research has been conducted on young fans, there is a research gap regarding older fans (Harrington & Bielby, 2017). The study of older fans is of great interest as fan practices may change with age, given age norms set by society defining both the appropriateness and inappropriateness of fandom. As a result of these age norms, fans potentially conceal their fandom based on outsiders' judgments, considering fandom is typically perceived as both immature and somewhat inappropriate for adults (van der Graaf, 2018; Harrington & Bielby, 2010a; Harrington & Bielby, 2010b; Bennett, 2006; Vroomen,

2004; Harrington & Bielby, 2017). These judgments about adult fans render such age norms very influential in adulthood (Harrington & Bielby, 2017). Examining these age norms by focusing on adult fans rather than adolescents is particularly important for today's society, as “the twenty-first-century mainstreaming of fandom allows once-stigmatized communities to legitimize their practices in light of broader cultural trends” (Harrington & Bielby, 2017, p. 410). The study of this social interdependence of fandom and age, especially concerning adulthood, is still an understudied topic within fan research (van der Graaf, 2018). Filling this research gap is both scientifically and socially relevant, as society itself, and therefore media consumers, are aging, which in turn could influence fan expressions and activities. This underscores the importance of understanding aging in fandoms (Harrington & Bielby, 2017).

Additionally, aging in fandoms is related to fans' life experiences, as fans may be influenced in their identities through their fan object (Harrington & Bielby, 2010a; Harrington & Bielby, 2010b; Harrington et al., 2011). This adds even further social relevance to this study, as it permits an examination of why fans remain loyal over the long term, how their engagement changes, and the effects it has on their own lives and identities. This is particularly relevant in the case of *Harry Potter*, as people have grown up reading and watching the series (Hills, 2019; Martens, 2019; Kuhn, 2002). The emotionality resulting from the long commitment to one franchise moreover gives the study of older fans considerable relevance due to the stability fandom may provide in a person's adult life, as observed in previous research (Harrington & Bielby, 2017).

In addition, the study of adult fans in the context of their life course is relevant, as “the lifecourse, as a social construct, continues to morph under neoliberal pressures, e.g. as financially well-off ageing fans can experience an extended period of post-employment lifestyle consumerism” (Hills, 2019, p. 90). The financial resources of adult fans, therefore, also underscore the relevance of this research in terms of academic and professional relevance in developing marketing strategies for aging audiences as well as lasting audience engagement. Fans are not passive consumers but rather engage in participatory production activities (Fuschillo, 2020; Dolbec & Fischer, 2015), also referred to as prosumer fan labor (Seymour, 2018). Fans create content based on their knowledge and skills, which could enhance brands (Fuschillo, 2020). The *Harry Potter* fandom is an example of how fans participate in marketing the franchise through their own content like fan fiction or fan art. Since fans are regarded as an asset to a company's marketing strategy and thus could have a significant impact on future marketing practices, it is important to learn about their engagement with the franchise (Fuschillo, 2020; Kozinets, 2014). This is especially

significant considering Web 3.0, which refers to new advances in internet technology, where customers change from being passive to active, thus reinforcing the significance of community development and participation (Garrigos-Simon et al., 2012).

Lastly, studying fans does not only concern the entertainment sector, but also the public and political spheres. According to Sandvoss et al. (2017), it is this political side in particular that renders the study of fandoms relevant. For example, in research on fan cultures, activism has been a prevalent topic (Bennet, 2014). Especially the *Harry Potter* fandom is known for its activism regarding social justice issues (Seymour, 2018). For example, fans founded the Harry Potter Alliance, now known as Fandom Forward, a non-governmental organization advocating for issues such as LGBTQIA+ equality (Fandom Forward, n.d.). This is particularly significant considering the controversy surrounding author J.K Rowling and her transphobic comments on Twitter, suggesting that fans are claiming the series for themselves while excluding the author from it (Duggan, 2021). Moreover, these activist notions of fandom may also have creative implications, as fans possess a certain amount of power over creative decisions for producers and writers to consider, possibly demanding the inclusion of more diverse characters in this context (Sullivan, 2020a; Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995).

## **1.2 Structure of the thesis**

After this introduction to the topic and thesis, what follows is the theoretical framework of this thesis. This chapter includes both general fan studies and more specific theories that are relevant to answering the research question of this thesis, that is, life course fandom and cyclical fandom. Subsequently, the third chapter of this thesis outlines the methodology used in this research. This is then followed by the main body of the thesis, namely the results section presented in the fourth chapter. The main findings and themes discovered in the research are discussed in this part of the thesis and related to the theory at hand. Chapter five concludes the thesis by summarizing the research key findings with the purpose of answering the research question as well as providing practical and theoretical implications. The conclusion is then rounded up by identifying research limitations and pointing out further research interests.

## **2 Theoretical Framework**

To fathom why the *Harry Potter* fan community remained as active as it did, even though its demise was predicted after the publication of the last book (Duggan, 2021), several theories can be drawn upon. Before doing so, this chapter clarifies how key topics such as fandoms and fans are understood in this thesis. In addition, relevant theories are presented to better understand fan engagement in general, how it changes over time, and what long-term fandom entails. Beyond that, existing work on lifelong fandom and cyclical fandom is presented. Finally, theoretical motivations for entry and exit into fandom are addressed.

### **2.1 Fans and fandoms**

Three main waves can be identified within fan research, all of which challenge negative perceptions and stereotypes of fans as immature, passive, and uneducated (Sandvoss et al., 2017; Jenkins, 1992; Sullivan, 2020a). During the first wave in the late 1980s and early 1990s, academics including Henry Jenkins (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) centered their research on the active role of fans and their creative production of texts related to the fan object. According to Sandvoss et al. (2017), this first wave therefore centered around power and representation of fans. The second wave of fan studies, while still largely concentrating on fan productivity, additionally explored how fandoms reproduce existing socio-cultural hierarchies originating in mainstream culture (Sandvoss et al., 2017; Sullivan, 2020a). In this tradition of fan research, fans are considered to be active, highly engaged, and passionate about their fan object. Frequent negative stereotypes of fandoms are explained as a result of the fan object. This implies that fans themselves are not necessarily carriers of these negative stereotypes, but instead they are attributed to them based on their chosen subject of idolization (Jenkins, 1992; Sullivan, 2020a). However, research in this wave did not address individual motives and gratifications of fans (Sandvoss et al., 2017). This was the core of the third wave both at the micro level regarding intrapersonal motivations between fans and their fan objects and at the macro level regarding "overarching social, cultural, and economic transformations" (Sandvoss et al, 2017, p. 7).

Previous research on fan cultures has clustered fans into either full-time committed fans or temporary committed fans (Fuschillo, 2020; Schembri, 2009; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Hills (2005), for example, observes fans being rather temporarily attached to their fan object as they cyclically move from one fan object to the next. This is supported by the theory of cyclical fandom, more extensively discussed in chapter 2.2.2. This contrasts with Bielby and Harrington's (2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2017) definition of fans as long-

term attached individuals who continuously engage with a single fan object. In their study, Bielby and Harrington (2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2017) address the question of how fandom develops over a person's lifespan and why fandom remains present in a person's life over long periods of time. This refers to the concept of life course fandom, which is discussed in detail in chapter 2.2.1. Both fan groups and the theories briefly introduced in relation to them are of interest to this study because it seeks to examine not only why fans remain loyal over long periods of time, but also how that commitment may change. Sandvoss (2005) offers a definition of fans encompassing both intensely committed full-time fans and more casual, temporary committed fans:

the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films, or music, as well as popular texts in a broader sense such as sports teams and popular icons and stars ranging from athletes and musicians to actors. (p. 8)

This definition accommodates that nowadays almost everyone is a fan of something. This is partly attributed to the digital transformation and the resulting constant presence of media in daily life (Sullivan, 2020a). Digitization has further transformed fandom by changing the way fans can interact with celebrities as objects of their admiration. In her study of Lady Gaga's relationship with her fans on social media, Bennet (2018) noted that the Internet allows fans to connect directly with celebrities in a more personal way. Therefore, when studying fans and fan communities today, social media activities must be considered.

Two central elements of media fandom are observed in fan studies. First, the social component refers to fans socializing with other fans to share their interest and enthusiasm through, for instance, social media, fan websites, or social gatherings organized by fans. Furthermore, re-reading or re-watching media content is an essential part of being a fan to gain extensive knowledge about the fan object and to explore different perspectives about it with other fans (Jenkins, 1992; Sullivan, 2020a). Beyond that, the social aspect of fandoms extends to creating a safe environment for expressing one's fandom (Sandvoss, 2005). The second component of media fandom is interpretation, referring to fans' interpretation and production of their own media content surrounding the fan object (Sullivan, 2020a; Jenkins, 1992). Therefore, fans can either express their fandom individually or collectively in fan communities (Williams, 2018a). To include these two components, a fan in this research is defined as

a person with a relatively deep, positive emotional conviction about someone or something famous, usually expressed through recognition of style or creativity. Fans

find their identities wrapped up with the pleasures connected to popular culture. They inhabit social roles marked up as fandom. (Duffet, 2013, p. 18)

### **2.1.1 Fan engagement and activities**

As audiences are always engaged in some way with media texts, fans are distinguishable from general audiences based on the degree of their engagement: “What media fans do, how they engage with a text, is an expansion and extension of (what we understand to be) typical receptive practices” (The Janissary Collective, 2018, p. 78). As explained earlier, fans are considered as an active audience. However, there are differences within a fandom itself in terms of the level of fan engagement, as fan activities can vary in intensity. According to Baym and Burnett (2009), a distinction can be made between low-investment fan promotion and active fan production. Low-investment fan promotion involves only minor efforts made by fans, such as contacting other fans on the Internet. Active fan production, on the other hand, refers to the creation of fan-owned content and even events. In this area, fans' knowledge and expertise about a particular media text plays an important role (Baym & Burnett, 2009).

To account for various levels of fan engagement, general theories of engagement are considered. Smith and Derville Gallicano (2015) identify four main aspects of engagement. The first factor is information consumption. This can be seen as the starting point of engagement and is encouraged by audiences seeking information about certain media texts. The second factor is sense of presence. This refers to audience members being aware of their own cognitive involvement in a media text, while also investing more time and attention in it. Third, interest immersion follows. Audiences develop a personal interest about media texts, which they need to fulfill. Interest immersion is often considered as a form of self-actualization. Lastly, social connectivity is a driving factor of engagement. People may engage with media texts to be socially connected and approved (Smith & Derville Gallicano, 2015). Another theory of engagement is Shao's (2009) three-level model of engagement. The first level is consumption, motivated by the search for information and entertainment. The second level is participation, where social interaction is sought, and communities are formed. In this research, the latter refers to fandoms. The last level is production, which serves self-expression and self-actualization. All three levels are interdependent (Shao, 2009). Both models of engagement are valuable for this research as it allows for exploring what type of engagement activities fans participate in and whether this is related to their long-term commitment to the *Harry Potter* franchise.

Based on the theories of engagement presented, a framework with four different stages of engagement is derived for this study with the intention to explore the level of engagement of fans and how they express their fandom. The first phase is information seeking. This phase is based on Smith and Derville Gallicano's (2015) information consumption aspect and Shao's (2009) consumption level. This first stage of engagement refers to initial encounters with the fan object and the conscious search for further information, but not yet further engagement with the fan object. The second stage is called content immersion, building on the aspects of sense of presence and interest immersion of Smith and Derville Gallicano (2015), and describes fans immersing themselves in the content around the fan object and consuming it regularly. The first two stages belong to Baym and Burnett's (2009) category of low-investment fan promotion, as fans are more likely to consume content than produce it. They also engage with the fan object individually as opposed to collectively (The Janissary Collective, 2018). The third stage of engagement is that of social fan connection, drawing on Smith and Derville Gallicano's (2015) aspect of social connectivity and Shao's (2009) level of participation. In this stage, fans build meaningful relationships with other fans and engage in discussions around the fan object, for example, by interacting with content provided by other fans and disseminating that content within the fan community. Such fan activities are referred to as communal (The Janissary Collective, 2018). The final stage of engagement is labeled content production and is grounded in Shao's (2009) level of production. In this stage, engagement can manifest itself in productive activities by fans, a key aspect of being a fan (The Janissary Collective, 2018; Sullivan, 2020a). For example, fans in this stage may create their own websites to share news and information about the fan property. Other fan activities include creating creative content such as art and video montages based on the media texts or fan fiction (Busse & Hellekson, 2014; The Janissary Collective, 2018; Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992). Out of these activities, fan fiction is one of the most popular fan activities and refers to stories written by fans about the fan object (The Janissary Collective, 2018; Black, 2009; Bacon-Smith, 1992; Busse & Hellekson, 2006; Jenkins, 1992). These stories are oftentimes about popular characters as well as about the fan writers themselves by inserting themselves into the story. Fan fictions therefore purposely allow fans to engage with media texts but also lead to building a fan community as fan fictions provide the basis for discussing more texts than just the initial ones (Sullivan, 2020a). Thus, both individual engagement, such as creative and productive fan activities, and communal engagement, such as discussions about the content created, are forms of fan engagement at this stage (The Janissary Collective, 2018).

Additionally, fan productivity is further encouraged by the internet and the Web 2.0, as it allows fans to easily share their content with others and receive approval (Baym & Burnett, 2009). This emphasizes the growing value of fan participation, as “they are gatekeepers, filters, and influencers on a scale they never were before the Internet” (Baym & Burnett, 2009, pp. 445-446).

As demonstrated by this discussion, there is a wide range of fan activities and what fan engagement as well as the expression of one’s fandom entails. However, to participate in the fan activities described above, certain competencies must be acquired: technical and conceptual competencies (The Janissary Collective, 2018). Technical skills are skills required for content creation and the ability to engage and interact with the fan community. Today, this might refer to being able to use social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to create content and being able to join fan groups on social media. Conceptual competencies, on the other hand, refer to interpersonal and interpretive skills, such as understanding not only the material of the fan object itself, but also being able to communicate comprehensively with other fans (The Janissary Collective, 2018). These competencies are important to note due to their influence on fan engagement. Low technical competencies, for example, potentially lead fans to consume rather than produce.

## **2.2 Long-term fan engagement**

An important element of this study is that the fans focused upon here are ‘long-term’ fans, meaning they have been engaged with a fandom for long periods of time and keep revisiting the fan object (Sandvoss, 2005). To investigate long-term fan engagement, the *Harry Potter* fandom serves as an exemplary case. The *Harry Potter* franchise has had international success, with the books being translated into 80 languages and adapted into major movie pictures. One factor attributed to this success is the deep attachment to the fictional world and characters of *Harry Potter* (Tribe et al., 2021). Especially the audience appreciation of the characters has been a key factor in its success, as fans were able to form parasocial relationships with the characters (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011), referring to audience members seeing the characters as their friends in some way as they get insights into their life and feelings due to the books and movies (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This may be the case because the series is mainly focused on only a few main characters, allowing fans to build a relationship with them (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011) and be emotionally tied to them (Williams, 2018a). Furthermore, fans were able to grow up with the characters as new media texts including books and movies emerged over a time from 1998 until 2011. This renders the

*Harry Potter* fan community one of great interest for study, as it potentially has shaped an entire generation and is therefore associated with nostalgia for many fans due to its significant connection to their childhoods (Bolin, 2016; Zsubori & Das, 2018). More so, those in that generation might tie important life milestones to their consumption of *Harry Potter*, which is what this thesis focuses upon.

Furthermore, the *Harry Potter* fandom is characterized through its very active fan community. This not only applies to the creation of fan art or fan fiction, for instance, but also to real-life activism. *Harry Potter* fans created Fandom Forward, formerly known as the Harry Potter Alliance, to advocate for LGBTQIA+ Equality as well as Gender Equity (Fandom Forward, n.d.). The generational aspect as well as the active nature of the *Harry Potter* fandom make it a suitable case study for investigating long-term fan engagement. To better understand the phenomenon of long-term fandom, two main theories are examined to explore how this might extend to this research: life course fandom and cyclical fandom.

### **2.2.1 Life course fandom**

To understand why and how people remain fans over a long period of time, the concept of life course fandom is considered. The literature on the life course distinguishes four main aspects. First, both intrinsic psychological as well as extrinsic societal factors have been identified to influence the life course of individuals (Harrington & Bielby, 2010a). More generally, this implies that life course researchers are addressing social and historical transformations since these are essential in understanding the behavior of individuals within a generation. Second, life course researchers point out that socialization is a process shaping an individual's entire life and not only childhood or adolescence. Third, life course scholars view the development of the self as a cumulative process, implying the importance of experiences in the childhood for adulthood. Finally, the last key insight of life scholars is that fan narratives are ways to reproduce the past through remembering. In summary, life course research therefore focuses on how fandom affects identities, everyday routines, and the progression of a person's life (Harrington & Bielby, 2010a). This also refers to the extent to which media texts are involved in both life trajectories as well as life course transformations (Harrington & Bielby, 2010b). An example of how deeply a media text can be interwoven with the life course of a generation is the reaction to the release of the final *Harry Potter* book:

The sadness that many readers will experience ... has nothing to do with the fate of the characters and everything to do with ... the end of childhood. The readers who have grown up with this series – who have read it, as it were, in real time as it unfolds – are

themselves at that end. Saying goodbye to Harry is like saying goodbye to a piece of themselves. (Jones, 2007, as cited in Harrington & Bielby, 2010b, p. 431)

This is consistent with Williams' (2018a) finding that the conclusion of a fan object, such as the final book or film of *Harry Potter*, has significant implications for both collectively and individually committed fans. For example, fans may be distressed in their identity as fans and their relationship to the fan object. According to Williams (2018a), there are three main discourses reflecting how fans may respond to the demise of a fan object. First, fan identities are restored as part of the reiteration discourse, meaning fans continue to engage intensely with the fan object (Williams, 2018a). One way to do this is to re-read or re-watch a series (Click & Holladay, 2018). Second, the renegotiation discourse refers to fans accepting the end not only of the fan object but also of their own fandom, acknowledging that the fan object once was an important part of their lives but is now becoming less important. Finally, the rejection discourse applies to fans who are relieved to see the end of their fan object and even criticize and disapprove of the object (Williams, 2018a). In particular, the reiteration discourse aligns with the concept of life-course fandom, which assumes strong fan engagement throughout a person's life (Harrington & Bielby, 2010b). This alludes that fandom does not necessarily end upon the termination of the fan object, but rather that fans can remain active in a variety of creative practices afterwards (Williams, 2018a). Moreover, such long-term fan engagement is fostered by digitality, which provides fans with access to archived fan objects through streaming and permits fans to expand the fan object through fan fiction, for instance (Harrington & Bielby, 2014; Click & Holladay, 2018; Baym & Burnett, 2009).

By applying the life course perspective to fandoms, Harrington and Bielby (2010b) assume an age-dependent configuration of fandoms with four aspects to consider: "Fandom and life milestones, changes in the fan (self) over time, age norms within fandom, and changes in the fan object over time" (pp. 434-435). Therefore, life course researchers focus on life course trajectories by examining the underlying determinants that affect or potentially confound an individual's life course. By implication, these are factors that can lead to divergent trajectories in the life course (Harrington & Bielby, 2010b). Such factors, in the context of this research, are encounters with fan objects and communities: "Becoming a fan thus re-directs the life course, gives new meaning, structure and purpose to specific life stages, and marks periods of one's personal past – hallmarks of a major turning point according to life course scholars" (Harrington & Bielby, 2010b, p. 438). Joining a fan community is considered by researchers to be an important milestone affecting the subsequent

course of one's life and one's identity (Harrington & Bielby, 2010b). Through creative activities as explained before, fans not only express themselves, but they also integrate their favorite media texts more deeply into their lives, and thus, into their identities (The Janissary Collective, 2018). In addition, one's fan identity may change over time in connection to aging and experiencing other developmental stages in life. For example, one's fan identity may change as one learns to drive a car, as this provides more opportunities to participate in fan activities, such as traveling to fan events located farther away. Another age-related change in fan identities is the shift from attending school to going to work full-time, as this is usually accompanied by less time to invest in fan activities. Hence, as people age, their identities change due to various factors, which in turn alters the fandom (Harrington & Bielby, 2010b). It is important to consider these age-dependent changes to understand the appropriateness or pertinence of being a fan in an individual's life, that is, why someone is or remains a fan of something at a certain point in their life (Harrington & Bielby, 2010b). According to Harrington & Bielby (2010b), for example, it can be assumed that fan communities provide important points of orientation and of reference, especially during uncertain phases of adulthood. Similarly, Sandvoss (2005) describes fandoms as a home for fans: "fans in different fields of popular culture often refer to their fandom in terms of 'emotional warmth' or a sense of security and stability, which in turn are associated with *Heimat*" (p. 64). The feeling of security and stability is experienced collectively, but also strongly individually. Such feelings are reinforced by places associated with the fan object which can be visited (Sandvoss, 2005). In the case of this research, such a place would be the Warner Brothers Studio Tour, where one can see the sets and costumes of *Harry Potter* (Williams, 2018b). Visiting these places allows fans to delve deeper into this world and integrate it into their own, as well as experience a "sense of belonging which has otherwise shifted into the textual space of media consumption" (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 64).

The life course perspective on fandoms highlights the embeddedness of fandoms in socially constructed life stages (Bielby & Harrington, 2017). Harrington et al. (2011) identify two facets of fandoms related to the concept of life course transitions: emotional maturation and self-narrativization (p. 576). Emotional maturation addresses changes in emotional investment associated with self-transformation. Just as one's identity changes as one grows older, so does the fan community to which one belongs. These changes are fundamental to this study as they help to understand why people remain fans of the *Harry Potter* series at different stages of life, but also how the fandom itself may change and how fan practices differ from one stage of life to another. It further underscores that fandoms and fan activities

not only play a role in identity construction during adolescence but continue to have a significant influence as one grows older and leaves adolescence behind, given that aging poses challenging demands on the individual, and thereby also alters one's fandom (Harrington et al., 2011). Emotional maturation or development is therefore closely linked to the development of fandoms. Such a focus on emotionality is crucial, as “affect is at the core of both fan and anti-fan experiences” (Harrington et al., 2011, p. 577). This take on understanding emotional maturation within fandoms is furthermore important for marketing practices, as it helps to understand why and how fan practices may change over time, leading to implications for targeting fans (Harrington et al., 2011). Self-narrativization further considers the question of identity construction, meaning “that the fictional helps construct what it is the ‘real’ self *becomes*” (Harrington et al., 2011, p. 581) and highlighting an interconnection of the self with the fictional. Fictional characters become role models appropriate for fans' ages, allowing fans to relate to these characters. Through these role models, fans form self-narratives throughout their lives, which can change and adapt with age (Harrington et al., 2011). Accordingly, the life course perspective on fandoms is inherently associated with an emphasis on developments and changes throughout the lifespan (Harrington & Bielby, 2010a).

In their case study of long-term fans of soap operas, Harrington and Bielby (2010a) found that in many cases people became long-term fans after being introduced to the media text by family members. This demonstrates the importance of reaching out to multiple generations. Petersen (2018) also emphasizes this importance of media generations. This is especially applicable to media texts spanning over long periods of time, thus allowing fans to become deeply emotionally invested in them and their characters, as they offer some sort of ongoing continuity in life. Petersen (2018) argues that as characters go through stages of life, so do their fans, and in this regard, they grow with the characters. Due to the prevalence of media texts in a large portion of a fan's life, the fan's own life experiences intertwine with the experiences of the characters (Petersen, 2018). Re-watching a series only reinforces this merging of experiences, as it is “a way to combine their past with their future in constantly new and unexpected ways through the series’ narrative” (Petersen, 2018, p. 228). This also applies to the *Harry Potter* fan community. The original *Harry Potter* series began with the release of the first book in 1998 and concluded with the final movie in 2011. As new spin-offs of the *Harry Potter* universe continue to be released, there is a great sense of continuity in the franchise. According to Petersen (2018), it is this continual nature of the franchise which is of key interest in comprehending long-term fan commitment.

### 2.2.2 Cyclical fandoms

Researching long-term fan engagement involves not only exploring loyal fan engagement with a single fan object, but also understanding how such engagement may change and redirect to a different fan object. Emotionality and affective attachment are part of being a fan, regardless of whether it is love or hate towards a fan object. Therefore, a person's opinion towards a fan object can change over time, for example from love to hate (Busse, 2018). To this end, the concept of cyclical fandoms is valuable for comprehensively considering how fan practices can change and why.

The concept of cyclical fandom assumes that people do not remain fans of the same object, but switch from one fan object to another, and centers around the temporality of fandom (Hills, 2005; Williams, 2018a). Hills (2005) found in his study that his participants became deeply involved with a fan object until they depleted it. The fan object therefore lost its appeal, which led them to become interested in a new fan object and join a new fan community. Hills (2005) discovered a pattern of object relationship of one of his participants “through the way that he uses media texts to hold powerful affective states of self-discovery and self-transformation” (p. 818). The concept of cyclical fandom therefore incorporates individual affections and involvement with a particular fan object, changing in cycles as a new, more appealing object is encountered (Hills, 2005). In some ways, this aligns with one of the three discourses of fan responses towards a fan object's demise by Williams (2018a) as outlined earlier: the rejection discourse. By rejecting a previous fan object, fans have new resources, such as attention, to direct toward a new fan object. Besides that, cyclical patterns of fan activity can also be driven by changing fan preferences. Something enjoyed by fans in the past may no longer be as attractive to them. This is also related to the creative choices that are made regarding a fan object. For example, rejection of a once beloved fan object may be amplified if fans are disappointed with the plot, leading to feeling betrayed (Booth, 2018).

Although cyclical fandom differs from life course fandom in the sense that the fan engagement not only revolves around a single fan object, it resembles life course fandom in its perspective about identities. In conceptualizing cyclical fandom, Hills (2005) assumes that fan identity is not fixed, but rather is subject to multiple changes. This in turn leads to patterns and routines in consumption and fandom, i.e., how one engages with a fan object, immerses oneself in it until one gets bored with it and exhausts it, only to move on to a new fan object. These patterns are repeated cyclically, with each cycle having implications for one's identity (Hills, 2005). While Driessen (2018) also found in her research on adult fans of the Backstreet Boys that these fans return to their fandom only occasionally in a nostalgic manner, they are

still committed to fandom given the support it has provided and continues to provide them at various stages of their lives. Driessen (2018) refers to this as perpetual fandom.

Both the concept of cyclical and, by extension, that of perpetual fandom are useful for this study as fans of the original *Harry Potter* series may have transitioned to the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise, for instance, emerging themselves in it, but nevertheless remaining part of the larger fandom even though they transitioned to a new fan object.

### **2.2.3 Entry and exit motivations**

Finally, it is important to understand why someone initially decides to join a fan community, but also why one decides to leave that very same fandom. For this, a recent exemplary study about the Norwegian series *SKAM* by Sundet and Petersen (2021) is drawn upon. In this study, Sundet and Petersen (2021) examine the motivations for joining and leaving the fan community of *SKAM*. They identified three levels: intrapersonal, social, and transmedial. The intrapersonal level refers to individual and private motivations such as tastes and interests, while the social level refers to the influence of others on one's emotions and attitudes toward a fandom object (Sundet & Petersen, 2021). Motivations for joining a fandom on an intrapersonal level are identification with the characters of the series, for example, and a certain kind of infatuation that participants themselves report feeling while watching the series. These initial and very personal feelings are subsequently reinforced on the social level when fans meet, share information and their feelings about the fan object. In this way, friendships are formed that solidify the entry into the fandom (Sundet & Petersen, 2021). Similarly, in her research on fans of the Backstreet Boys, Driessen (2015) found that friendships formed on the basis of sharing a common fanship were significant for retention in a fan community. The intrapersonal and social entry motivations are also reflected in Sandvoss's (2005) description of fandom as a home. Fan communities provide a safe environment to express one's fondness without judgement and convey a feeling of belonging. On the other hand, these motivations are very personal, as identification with characters, for example, can influence one's identity (Sandvoss, 2005; Harrington & Bielby, 2010b; Harrington et al., 2011). Finally, on the transmedial level, the position as a fan is further amplified because of the presence of the fan object on social media, for instance. Fans are exposed to the fan object on a regular basis (Sundet & Petersen, 2021).

In addition to these entry motivations, Sundet and Petersen (2021) also cite reasons for leaving a fandom in their study. On the intrapersonal level are the personal effects of fan obsession, such as fatigue from being a fan. Fans were worn out by their own obsession,

which they even described as digital work. Moreover, on the social level, conflicts within a fandom itself may lead to exiting the fandom. The omnipresence of the series on various media platforms also caused fans to feel like they were addicted and no longer had control, to the extent that they acted against these feelings by leaving the fandom (Sundet & Petersen, 2021). These reasons are also reflected in Williams' (2018a) discourse of rejection, in which fans feel relieved about the end of a fan object due to intense emotional involvement. As mentioned earlier, other reasons for leaving a fandom may include disappointment with the fan object's development and a change in tastes or interests (Williams, 2018a, Booth, 2018). These reasons are in line with Sundet and Petersen's (2021) intrapersonal exit motivations.

As already explained, this research also aims to investigate how long-term fan engagement can change. One change could be, for example, leaving the fandom as “one’s fan identity is elective and thus can be abandoned at any point” (Harrington & Bielby, 2010b, p. 438). Therefore, Sundet and Petersen's (2021) model of fan motivations is applied to this research, as it not only helps to understand motives behind long-term fan commitment to one fan object, but also because it helps to identify how this commitment may change, resulting in exiting the fandom. However, it should be noted that Sundet and Petersen's (2021) study is exemplary and focuses heavily on one particular series, *SKAM*, and therefore only provides very specific entry and exit motivations of fans of the series.

### **2.3 Main theoretical take aways**

In this chapter, several theories were presented helping to discuss the research question and providing a theoretical background for this thesis. First, based on various theories of engagement, a framework for fan engagement was developed with four stages: information seeking, content immersion, social fan connection, and content production. While the first two stages are considered primarily passive and individual fan activities, the final stages are considered active and primarily collaborative fan activities (Smith & Derville Gallicano, 2015; Shao, 2009, The Janissary Collective, 2018; Sullivan, 2020a; Baym & Burnett, 2009). Second, the concepts of life course fandom and cyclical fandom were introduced as a basis for understanding long-term fan engagement and its influence on a person's life course, as well as to consider possible changes in fan engagement (Harrington & Bielby, 2010b; Bielby & Harrington, 2017; Busse, 2018; Hills, 2005; Williams, 2018a). Finally, this chapter also provided an overview of possible entry and exit motivations in fandoms, which are essentially summarized on three levels, namely intrapersonal, social, and transmedial (Sundet & Petersen, 2021).

### 3 Method

To answer the research question *How do fans give meaning to their long-term commitment to the Harry Potter franchise?*, a qualitative research method is appropriate as the perspective of the fans is central to this research. According to Boeije (2010), it is the aim of qualitative research to investigate social phenomena in terms of the meaning people assign to them. As qualitative methods allow to explore a topic in-depth and do not aim at generalizability the same way as quantitative methods do, a qualitative approach is suitable for this research (Palinkas et al., 2015).

For this research, qualitative interviews are conducted to collect the data. Qualitative interviews are an appropriate way to collect data especially “when the researcher strives to understand the interviewee’s subjective perspective of a phenomenon rather than generating generalizable understandings of large groups of people” (McGrath et al., 2019, p. 1002). Learning the perspective of fans themselves on their long-term commitment to the *Harry Potter* franchise through interviews allows to examine the process of meaning-making in relation to their fan engagement (Boeije, 2010). The perspective of the fans themselves is central to this study, as the purpose of this study is to examine how fans give meaning to their long-term commitment to the *Harry Potter* franchise. Because of the detailed insights fans can provide through this meaning-making process in qualitative interviews, this method is beneficial to this study (Boeije, 2010). The interviews are semi-structured, which means a topic list with questions was generated beforehand to ensure the most relevant topics for this research are discussed during the process of data collection (Boeije, 2010).

#### 3.1 Sample and sampling strategy

The interview participants were selected because of their long-term fandom of *Harry Potter*. To ensure this, one criterion had to be met for interview participation: they must have engaged with the *Harry Potter* series for at least 5 years, as the last film, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part II*, was released in July 2011 (Crumlish, 2022). This also allowed for the inclusion of fans who were only introduced to the original franchise after its final major release, but who have nevertheless been involved with it for a considerable amount of time.

As explained during the introduction, there is a gap in research on older fans after adolescence (Harrington & Bielby, 2017), which this study aims to fill by exploring the perspectives of these very fans. While people aged 10 to 19 are still considered adolescents, ages 20 to 24 are already associated with young or emerging adulthood (McDonagh et al., 2018). Following that conceptualization, the sample only consisted of fans aged above 20.

The youngest participant was 22 years old, the oldest participant was 30 years old, and on average, the fans interviewed were 23 years old. This sample of participants aged 22 and older was possible given that the *Harry Potter* fandom spans multiple generations and thus includes post-adolescent and adult fans (Ross, 2016).

Due to the specific requirements, criterion sampling was chosen as the sampling strategy. This purposeful sampling strategy ensured the relevance of the collected data to the research question (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants for the interviews were gathered via social media. Primarily, participants were contacted through fan groups or pages on Facebook and Instagram, as there are active *Harry Potter* fan communities on both platforms. An example of this call for participants can be found in Appendix E. A complementary method to criterion sampling used in this research was snowball sampling. After the initial collection of participants, those participants suggested other individuals relevant to the research topic who were subsequently contacted (Boeije, 2010).

In total, the group of interviewees consisted of twelve participants. Ten of those identified as female and two identified as male. The sample is composed of individuals between the ages of 22 and 30, and all of them completed a level of a higher education. Seven of the interview participants are currently enrolled in university, with three of them also being employed part-time or undertaking internships. Five of the respondents are employed working in a variety of jobs ranging from insurance, analysts, teachers, social media managers to film production and funding. Additionally, considering that *Harry Potter* is a worldwide phenomenon, this research deals with a global audience. Since the interview participants were recruited through social media, the sample is composed of participants of different nationalities. Five of the participants were German while the other participants represented one each of British, Vietnamese, Indian, Chilean, and American nationalities. In addition, among the participants, two shared dual nationalities: one was Brazilian and Italian, and the other was Dutch and Vietnamese.

### **3.2 Description of data collection**

Twelve interviews were conducted for this research. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, with an average of 50 minutes. As explained above, the sample includes participants from multiple countries. Therefore, four of the interviews took place in person, while the remaining interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Without the option of online interviews, the sample would be limited to participants located within close proximity. While this is not necessarily a detriment, an international sample was preferable for exploring

potential differences in fandom based on nationalities. This highlights the advantage of including online interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), as conducting interviews via Zoom permitted an international sample, allowing in turn for the exploration of national differences (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Moreover, online interviews are often considered to be more flexible and convenient for interview participants, as no valuable time is spent on traveling to the interview location, for instance. However, there are also concerns regarding online interviews, such as difficulties in building rapport (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). This problem was solved by extensive prior communication via email or messenger services, as both the interviewer and the interviewee introduced themselves in this prior communication and briefly talked about their engagement with *Harry Potter*. This enabled the interviewer to establish a connection with the interviewee, which was valuable for building a good rapport (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

As explained earlier, interviews are the most appropriate method to explore participants' perspectives on their own long-term fan engagement with *Harry Potter*. These perspectives formed the focus of the interviews. After establishing rapport as an important foundation for the interviews (Boeije, 2010), the participants were asked about their personal fan engagement, such as how long they have been fans and which fan activities they participate in. According to Robson (2011), a qualitative interview may be structured into five stages. The first stage was the introduction. During this stage, both the interviewer and the interviewee introduced themselves (Alsaawi, 2014) and small talk was encouraged to establish a foundation of trust (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Furthermore, the interviewer explained the interview purpose. The introduction was followed by the warm-up phase, in which both basic and rather light-hearted questions were asked to establish a good rapport and a comfortable atmosphere for the interview. Questions in the warm-up stage included general questions about being a fan and the entry into the fandom, such as “What do you like about being a Harry Potter fan?”, “Can you describe your first encounter with Harry Potter and how you came to know the franchise?” or “What does fandom mean in your life?”. Subsequently, the interview proceeded to the main phase, during which the questions focused on the main research topic. Therefore, this stage represented the largest and most relevant part of the interview (Alsaawi, 2014). In this research, questions addressed the participants' long-term engagement as fans of *Harry Potter*, such as their fan activities or what impact being a fan has had on their lives. Explementary questions included “In which ways do you express your fandom?”, “Has being a fan of Harry Potter affected you and your identity in any way, e.g., the characters resonating or being role models to you?” or “Would you say that your

commitment as a fan has changed over the years?”. Before concluding the interview, the conversation progressed to the cool-down stage. Mirroring the warm-up stage, simple questions were asked to conclude the conversation, including, for example, “How do you see your relationship with Harry Potter and the entire franchise in the future?”. Finally, the interviewer thanked the interviewee for participating during the last stage, namely the closure stage, and invited him or her to ask questions if desired (Alsaawi, 2014). Despite the prepared list of questions, the interviewer remained open to the interview process and allowed for deviation from these questions depending on the situation during the interview (Boeije, 2010).

To ensure the data was treated in an ethical manner and to inform participants of the interview process, respondents were asked to both read and sign an informed consent form prior to the interview (Appendix C). The purpose of such a consent form was to ensure the interview participants comprehend the purpose of the research (Warren, 2011). This was important given sensitive personal information such as personal feelings about a topic or private activities are often addressed in qualitative interviews (Johnson, 2011). Therefore, the consent form included the research title and the name of the principal investigator, along with a description of the purpose and procedures of the research. Participants were further informed about being recorded for the purpose of transcribing the interviews. These recordings were securely stored on a password-protected computer. The transcription of the interviews, which was done verbatim after data collection, was also handled ethically by using pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the interview participants (Boeije, 2010). By doing so, information shared by the participants were protected from any misuses (Johnson, 2011), such as “invasion of privacy, breaches of confidentiality or anonymity, and distress caused by topics raised in the interview process itself” (Warren, 2011, p. 89). Moreover, respondents were given the opportunity to read the transcript and research paper if requested (Qu & Dumay, 2011), about which they were also informed in the consent form. By signing the consent form, participants confirmed their voluntary participation in the research, from which they could withdraw at any time. In addition, the principal investigator's contact information was provided in case of questions or concerns. Adherence to these ethical standards was critical for a trusting relationship between the interviewer and the respondent, which in turn was essential for a good and credible research outcome (Ryen, 2011).

### **3.3 Data analysis and operationalization**

Following data collection, a thematic content analysis was conducted, which sought to interpret the material in terms of its meaning and identify themes in the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, Schreier, 2014; Boeije, 2010). Themes are patterns reflected in the data pertinent to the research question and therefore rely not only on quantifiable factors such as frequency but also their connection to the research purpose. Identifying these themes in the gathered data involved an inductive, data-driven approach designed to not limit the researcher to a previously defined coding framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Schreier, 2014).

Furthermore, thematic analysis in this study focused on identifying themes at a semantic, explicit level, whereby themes were identified through participants' explicit responses as well as cursory meanings derived from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006,).

In the case of data-driven coding, following the first phase of transcribing the interviews, the second phase of thematic analysis allocated initial labels to segments of the material, also known as codes (Schreier, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2013, Boeije, 2010). The assigned code summarized the meaning and content of a data fragment. In this phase, the data fragments were coded inclusively by including relevant contextual data (Bryman, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, depending on their relevance, some data fragments “may be uncoded, coded once, or coded many times” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). Once no new codes were generated to label the data, a saturation point was reached and the phase was completed with an initial coding frame consisting of a list of all codes (Boeije, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Subsequently, the data and codes were reduced and reorganized in the third phase of thematic analysis. Codes describing similar phenomena were formed into one and only those most representatives were selected (Boeije, 2010). In addition, the initial codes were assigned themes, thereby identifying potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, in this phase, the research focus and analysis were refined (Boeije, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the fourth phase, the potential themes were revised on two levels. First, all data segments of a theme were re-read to ensure data support and consistent patterns within the data. If the data were found to be incoherent, a potential theme could have turned out not to be a theme at all (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Second, the entire dataset was re-read to not only ensure the relevance of all themes to the dataset, but also to code missing data excerpts. In this phase, some themes were also merged if they related to similar phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fifth phase proceeded with defining each theme and identifying possible sub-themes within them, a process beneficial for comprehensively organizing broad and complex themes. Finally, the outcome of the thematic analysis was a coding framework with

fully elaborated themes valuable in answering the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Boeije, 2010). For this research, four main themes were identified: "more passive than active engagement", "influences on fandom", "intertwining long-term fandom and life course", and "critical towards new content/marketing". Due to their size and complexity, both the themes "influences on fandom" and "intertwining long-term fandom and life course" included sub-themes. The themes and their sub-themes are introduced and analyzed in detail in the fourth chapter of this thesis which discusses these results.

### **3.4 Research credibility**

To ensure the credibility of this research, it was important to be aware of one's perspective and background, as this could have influenced the interview process and subsequent analysis. Both the interviewer and the interviewee have underlying backgrounds with potential influential factors. Being aware of these perspectives and their influences on the research process is especially important in qualitative interviews due to the aim of understanding the participants' meaning-making process (Waren, 2011).

Understanding this interpretive nature of qualitative research highlights the dependence of research findings on the researcher and the respondents (Shufutinsky, 2020). Although this implies that qualitative research is not necessarily generalizable and replicable in the way that quantitative research is, credibility and validity are nonetheless attainable if the researcher acknowledges the situation and is aware of his or her own knowledge and role in the research process. To avoid bias in research, it is important to be transparent throughout the research process, which was the objective of this methodology chapter. By explaining each step of the research process in detail, the reader understands how the research outcome was arrived at (Shufutinsky, 2020). In addition, the coding framework itself provides information about the research process, as it includes definitions exemplifying how and why a data segment was coded and assigned to a theme in this way.

To ensure consistency of coding and thus credibility of data analysis, two rounds of coding were conducted at two different times. After an initial round of coding, the interviews were coded by the researcher again within ten to fourteen days. As no major discrepancies occurred during these two rounds of coding, the coding frame only needed little revision (Schreier, 2014). To increase the validity of the coding frame, sub-themes were added, for instance, to ensure coverage of all relevant aspects of the interview as well as to ensure a comprehensible structure of the coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Schreier, 2014).

## 4 Results

To explore how fans give meaning to their long-term commitment to Harry Potter, twelve interviews have been conducted. These interviews were transcribed, and a thematic content analysis was performed on this data. Four main themes were identified in the analysis of the twelve interviews. In this chapter, these themes are presented and discussed in detail. First, the theme of "more passive than active engagement" is discussed in relation to fan activities, and some of these findings resonate with the four levels of engagement outlined in the theoretical framework. Second, the participants talked about various factors influencing their fandom and fan engagement, which the theme of "influences on fandom" summarizes. Thereafter, the analysis moves to the two main concepts in this thesis, namely life course fandom and cyclical fandom. To do so, the main theme "Intertwining long-term fandom and life course" is discussed to explain the long-term fan engagement of the participants and its changes over their life course as well as how the fandom has influenced the participants in their life course. Finally, participants also expressed strong opinions about new releases of the *Harry Potter* series as well as marketing activities, which is reflected in the theme "Critical towards new content/marketing".

### 4.1 Passive rather than active engagement

During the interviews, respondents talked about how they engaged with *Harry Potter* and the whole franchise as fans. While interviewees described a variety of fan activities, both active and passive, the overarching pattern was that interviewees primarily engaged in passive fan activities and only some interviewees occasionally engaged in active fan activities.

Additionally, passive fan activities were often individual fan activities, while active fan activities often included communal fan activities. This theme is subsequently illustrated in depth by discussing examples drawn from this research.

The most prominent passive fan activities included re-watching the movies and re-reading the books. For Chiara (23, female, student, Brazilian-Italian), for example, this constitutes a regular activity to engage with *Harry Potter*: "I would say like I'd do a marathon probably twice or three times a year or even more". Similarly, the 22-year-old student Michelle (female, German) described memorizing the books due to reading them frequently, especially in her childhood: "Some people have read the books in and out. I would count myself among them in this respect". Since both re-reading and re-watching were mentioned as main activities by all respondents, this underlines the significance of these activities. This resonates with the literature presented in the theoretical framework, as the practice of

extensive re-reading and re-watching allows fans to deepen their knowledge and expertise of the fan object and is therefore seen as an essential part of being a fan (Jenkins, 1992; Sullivan, 2020a). Acquiring knowledge about *Harry Potter* brought enjoyment to the participants, for example, by discovering hints in the early books about later plot twists. For Luisa (23, female, employee in film funding and production, German), understanding these clues and gaining more knowledge was a reason to repeatedly read the original book series. The strong prevalence of re-reading and re-watching the *Harry Potter* original series in the interviews is reminiscent of the discourse of reiteration as conceptualized by Williams (2018a). After a fan object ends, fans continue to engage with it by re-reading or re-watching it as it enables them to maintain as well as extend their fandom (Williams, 2018a; Click & Holladay, 2018).

Other fan activities described by most participants include listening to podcasts to gain more knowledge about *Harry Potter*, as these podcasts provide additional information or facts about the franchise. This shows the importance for fans to acquire trivial information about *Harry Potter*. Further information and new perspectives are gained by participants through reading fan fiction or viewing memes and edits on social media. However, while seven of the participants read fan fiction, they did not necessarily engage with it for long. Furthermore, fan fiction was often described to be a fan activity during adolescence and not adulthood: “I used to read some fan fictions when I was like 12” (Phoebe, 23, female, student, US). Since the previously described fan activities refer to participants immersing themselves in content related to *Harry Potter* regularly as well as consuming rather than producing, all participants have reached at least the second level of the engagement framework, namely ‘content immersion’. Participants invest time in consuming *Harry Potter* content while being aware of this investment (Smith & Derville Gallicano, 2015). Because the majority of the participants engage in these passive and primarily consumptive activities, most of the participants’ fan activities are classified as low-investment fan promotion (Baym & Burnett, 2009). Regarding this, previous literature also suggests fans engage with fan objects individually rather than collectively (The Janissary Collective, 2018), an observation also made in the interviews. Isaac (25, male, student, social media manager, German) strongly emphasized his individual fandom:

I want to experience it for myself. I want to listen to the podcast myself. I want to read a little bit about it myself, or if I’m totally nerdy, buy a Hufflepuff scarf and find out what Patronus I have or play those video games. [...] So it’s more like Isaac and his little Harry Potter bubble he lives in sometimes.

However, primarily passive engagement is not necessarily only voluntary, but affected by competencies as well. 23-years old student Jennifer (female, Dutch-Vietnamese) explained, for example, that “I wish I was that creative”. Similarly, Phoebe, who enjoys watching *Harry Potter* fan edits on TikTok, explained that she did not create videos herself because “I’m not good enough at like editing really to make TikTok’s”. This again resonates with the literature on fan engagement, for example, in terms of the need for technical skills to participate (The Janissary Collective, 2018). For Phoebe, active fan production was discouraged by limited content creation skills on TikTok.

Although the majority of participants mainly engage in rather passive individual fan activities, they occasionally also engage actively. These fan activities include, for example, writing fan fiction and owning a fan page or group. Especially Lewis (30, male, associate analyst, Indian) is very engaged in this regard: “I have a fan group of Harry Potter that I’m operating [...]. As for the fan fiction, I had written a fan fiction”. However, he later stopped writing fan fiction “because I did not think that it is doing the justice to the characters” (Lewis). Other active fan activities include joint activities with friends or other fans, such as meetings and theme parties or games and discussions:

I mean with work colleagues, we do like quizzes online. So, we've definitely done like what house are you in, what, what character are you most like? Me and my friend, we did download an app as well which I think had loads of Harry Potter quizzes on it.

(Gina, 23, female, employee in an insurance company, British)

For most participants, however, these active and collaborative activities are not as prevalent as the passive and individual fan activities. Although they did identify themselves as fans, the majority of the participants would describe themselves as a passive, rather lurking fan instead of an active fan, which they considered someone who does not simply consume *Harry Potter* content but also actively creates content and shares it with other fans. Only Lewis and Nadine (29, female, teacher, Chilean) regularly participate in active and communal fan activities, due to running fan pages and writing fan fiction. These fan activities resonate with higher levels of engagement as described by Smith and Derville Gallicano (2015) and Shao (2009). Therefore, these two interview participants have reached both the third and fourth stages of engagement, ‘social fan connection’ and ‘content production’ (Smith & Derville Gallicano, 2015; Shao, 2009; The Janissary Collective, 2018; Sullivan, 2020a).

As for additional active fan engagement, none of the participants engaged in fan activism in any way. In fact, the participants had never heard of the activist side of the fandom. Unlike Bennet (2014) and Sandvoss et al. (2017), who agree in that fandom is often

associated with activism in general, along with Seymour (2018) and Duggan (2021), who specifically consider the *Harry Potter* fan community to be activist, this activist side of fandom was not observed in the interviews. This finding illustrates that while most participants appreciated the activism of the Harry Potter fan community once they were informed about it, it is not a critical component of any of the participants' fandom.

## **4.2 Influences on fandom**

In the interviews, participants talked about various things that have influenced their own fan engagement and how it has changed or evolved as a result. Another important aspect identified in the data revolves around fans' activities and their expression of their fandom and how this has changed over time. Fans discussed both negative and positive factors influencing their fandom. The following sub-themes discuss these influences and what it meant to the participants' engagement in detail.

### **4.2.1 Negative fan experiences**

During the interviews, ten of the participants expressed several negative experiences experienced as a *Harry Potter* fan. First, the participants talked about negative experiences outside of the fandom such as being judged for their *Harry Potter* fandom due to their mature age. Luisa experienced that “when you're a kid, nobody tells you Harry Potter is bad, but the older you get, the more people think they have to criticize your enthusiasm”. Jennifer experienced such judgment in high school, as it was seen as nerdy and immature, causing her to engage less with *Harry Potter* during that time. Besides such external judgments, participants also talked about other negative experiences within the fan community affecting their fandom. For example, participants experienced parts of the fan community as aggressive regarding opinions or mistakes by other fans: “When you are in like a fan page or in a community and [...] you're having a discussion, a simple one, and you made a mistake [...]. People get very aggressive” (Nadine). Maxine (23, female, employed, Vietnamese) reported similar experiences leading her to follow discussions about *Harry Potter* rather passively and no longer actively participate in them. This extreme aspect of fandom is furthermore directed against people who, for example, have not read the books. Lewis expressed his annoyance at such fans:

People just make fun of those people who have only seen the movies [...]. Like you call yourself a Harry Potter fan? Tell me who is Peeves! That is how they make fun of the people who have only seen the movies.

Such negative experiences within the fan community, such as fans berating other fans for only having seen the movies as Lewis experienced it, as well as the pressure to always be up to date, sometimes caused respondents to withdraw from some of their fan activities. Luisa, for example, spoke of feeling a lot of pressure to know more than other fans and was annoyed by other fans' arrogance about their knowledge. She named an open online quiz about *Harry Potter* as an example, which ultimately became a negative experience because of the comparison with other fans:

I was just annoyed that there are other people who think they know more about Harry Potter than I do. [...] It's not that I say there are no people who know more than I do.

But it annoys me to see people who celebrate this world as much as I do, and in such a pretentious way. (Luisa)

Due to such experiences and clashes with other fans, Luisa prefers to participate in fan activities alone or together only with friends and family. The fan pressure and conflicts within the fan community described by participants resonate with the entry and exit motivations for *SKAM's* fan community described by Sundet and Petersen (2021) in their study. In this case, fans left the fan community due to disputes with other fans (Sundet & Petersen, 2021). The difference to the present research, however, is none of the participants left the fan community nor would they in the future as *Harry Potter* is too important to them to abandon. However, as explained earlier, the nature of participants' fan activities changed, and in some cases, they limited their activities to individual ones or shared their fandom only with friends and family. Therefore, these negative experiences influenced the participants' fandom regarding how and what fan activities they pursue.

#### **4.2.2 Disappointment in J.K. Rowling**

Beyond the discussed negative experiences affecting the participants' fandom, the controversy surrounding author J.K. Rowling concerning her transphobic remarks on Twitter also has an impact on how participants view *Harry Potter*, as well as how they engage with new content from her. All participants spoke of being disappointed in Rowling, which has implications at three main levels. First, all participants struggled acknowledging both old and new content from Rowling: on the one hand, they were unsure of what it meant to consume new content from her, as this would imply that they supported her; on the other hand, they valued the world she built and expressed that any continuation of the world should be written by her, at least in part: "I don't think you can discredit her from the entire franchise because she did create it and none of it would exist without her" (Phoebe).

Second, this disappointment is closely related to a strongly decreasing fascination about Rowling as a person. Six of the respondents recalled that they were fascinated by her as children and pictured her as a kind person. This led them to be even more disappointed in her character. Chiara, for instance, outlined changing opinions about Rowling: “I lost a lot of respect from her. Like, I thought I used to think she was, like, this greatest creator and everything”.

Third, this decreasing fascination is again related to how the participants engage with *Harry Potter* now as compared to before the controversy. Although all participants harbor mixed feelings about Rowling as a person, none consider the controversy reason enough to distance themselves from the fandom. Considering the importance of continuing to have *Harry Potter* in their lives, but also distancing themselves from Rowling and her statements, the majority of the participants personally separate the author from the story to some extent: “Sometimes I go [...] and I felt that I could live without the writer of the books. [...] I could follow the Harry Potter world, but I don't think that I will read more J.K. Rowling's books” (Nadine). Taking this separation of Rowling and her story as well as the decreasing fascination for her into account, it becomes evident that the participants’ fan engagement has changed from being a fan of *Harry Potter* and the author to just being a fan of *Harry Potter*. This is an important finding, however not reminiscent of the presented literature, as it allows understanding the fans' approach to cancel culture in relation to their long-term fan object, a phenomenon that is increasingly common today and should therefore be taken into account.

#### **4.2.3 Re-engagement through social media/digitality**

When participants talked about factors influencing their fan engagement, all of them also acknowledged the role of social media and digitization in their current engagement. Through algorithms on social media platforms, for example, eight of the participants are regularly exposed to content about *Harry Potter* without having to actively seek it out. This content exposure subsequently encourages engagement, from viewing to liking or sharing with friends:

That's what social media is all about, stirring up emotions, so of course when you scroll you have scroll stoppers like Harry Potter, wait a minute, I know that one too. Oh, I like that, look at this question, funny, I'll send it to my friend who also likes Harry Potter. (Isaac)

Thus, social media not only reconnects fans by providing them with content and information about *Harry Potter*, but also by enabling quick interactions between fans. Not only are fans

more closely connected, but social media also brings fans closer to the *Harry Potter* films' actors. For example, three of the participants talked about the strong presence of Tom Felton, the actor who portrays Draco Malfoy, on TikTok and his interaction with fans: “He exploded on TikTok for a while, [...] it was so interesting to see where he was” (Jennifer).

Additionally, social media and digitization allow easy access not only to new fan content, but also to original content such as the movies via streaming platforms: “Now [...] there are a lot more online channels where you can watch it. Obviously, you've also got YouTube, so you can watch clips and best bits and, and interviews of the actors” (Gina). Among the sources of information mentioned by all participants are mainly social media platforms, but also the official website Wizing World and its newsletter. This important role of social media and digitization also resonates with previous studies' observations suggesting that long-term fan engagement is further encouraged by digitization, as it provides fans with convenient access to information in general, such as on social media, but also to archived fan objects, including movies on streaming platforms (Harrington & Bielby, 2014; Click & Holladay, 2018; Baym & Burnett, 2009). Unlike Sundet and Petersen (2021), who assume at the transmedial level of exit motivations that such a strong social media presence overwhelms fans to the point of leaving the fandom, all participants in this study were instead re-engaged by the social media presence, as previously discussed.

#### **4.2.4 Sociality as continuation factor**

Finally, all participants also expressed how the social aspect of the fan community was important for them to stay connected to *Harry Potter*, as they considered it as another influence on their fan engagement. For example, all twelve participants said that they enjoy sharing their passion with others and that they were less engaged in times when there was no one to share it with: “at university there was no one in my immediate environment who was a fan and then to always watch or read alone [...] is of course possible, but more difficult” (Jane, 23, female, student, German).

Interacting with other fans also provides an opportunity to learn more about *Harry Potter*. Maxine, for example, enjoys the discussions about *Harry Potter* with other fans to “see people's opinions of certain situations, what theories they have or what other details that I may have missed”. Finally, the social aspect of being a fan, or in short, sociality as referred to in this research, is also considered a continuation factor, as most participants have encouraged others to become fans as well, thus contributing to the continuation of the fandom itself. Nadine, for example, works as a teacher and encourages her students to read *Harry*

*Potter*. For one, she wants her students to read meaningful texts, but she also wants to be able to talk about *Harry Potter* with other people, in this case her students:

I think that that is why I'm trying to create a little community inside my school. I have [...] these students that I could talk to about the movies or the book because this is where I am most of the time. (Nadine)

Seeing sociality as a continuation factor resonates to some extent with Sundet and Petersen's (2021) social entry motivations into fandom: By sharing information and meeting with other fans, friendships are formed and intensified, which in turn solidify the entrance into the fandom, or in this case the continuation of the fandom. Furthermore, the importance of social fan connections also resembles Driessen's (2015) research on the Backstreet Boys, which found that friendships are formed because of fandom and are beneficial in maintaining one's fandom. Furthermore, especially in relation to negative fan experiences, fan communities also provide a safe environment to express one's fondness without judgement and convey a feeling of belonging (Sandvoss, 2005). The fact that sociality is seen by all participants as a continuation factor on the one hand but is also associated with many negative experiences on the other hand, underlines the ambivalent relationship of the participants to this element of their fandom.

### **4.3 Intertwining long-term fandom and life course**

Due to participants' long-term engagement with *Harry Potter*, several patterns were observed in the interviews regarding the influence on participants' life courses regarding why people remain engaged. First, the long-term fan engagement itself is discussed by drawing on the sub-theme "constant in fan phases". Following this, the evolvement of the participants' fan engagement over their life course is discussed in "Differences between child- and adulthood". Finally, the two sub-themes of "influences on identity and life" and "escapism and personal refuge" are discussed in relation to how the fandom has influenced the participants in their life course.

#### **4.3.1 Constant in fan phases**

Although the participants experienced different influences on their fandom as elaborated on earlier, all participants remained connected to *Harry Potter* to some extent regardless. The participants all admitted to experiencing what they called waves of their engagement with *Harry Potter*. Jennifer, for example, was less engaged with the series in high school due to outside influences, but later became more engaged again. Therefore, the fans' life situation

also influenced their engagement. On the other hand, there are life circumstances that favor renewed engagement with the franchise. For example, both Phoebe and Chiara engaged more intensively with *Harry Potter* during the Covid 19 pandemic by virtue of increased free time: “especially like during COVID, like we had nothing going on in our lives” (Phoebe).

Moreover, for some participants, these waves of fan engagement were also fueled by other fan interests. Jane, for example, was heavily invested with the British boy band One Direction as a teenager:

I was a fan of One Direction from 13 to the beginning of 16 and was relatively active in the fandom. [...] And afterwards, [...] I was so mentally through with the topic, because that was [...] really something that I would explain a bit trendier.

This quote touches on an important finding from many of the interviews: the temporality of other fan interests. While the majority of participants became fans of other franchises as well, *Harry Potter* is the only franchise all participants were committed to long term. Furthermore, the participants still considered themselves fans of *Harry Potter* even when they were heavily involved with another fan object, making *Harry Potter* a constant fan object during changing phases of fan engagement: “You can't connect with Narnia in that way. You can't connect with the Game of Thrones in that way. [...] Harry Potter is much superior to all those all those worlds” (Lewis). This continuity in the *Harry Potter* fan community can be explained by the fans being more attached to the series than others due to their long relationship with it, as all participants had been exposed to it from a young age. In addition, all participants viewed the series as unique because they could personally identify strongly with the character's stories, despite it being a fantasy story. This familiarity, as well as the long involvement with the series dating back to childhood, thus play significant roles in why all participants value *Harry Potter* so highly. This is discussed in more detail in the later sub-theme “escapism and personal refuge”.

This constant nature of the *Harry Potter* fandom is more consistent with Driessen's (2018) concept of perpetual fandom than Hill's (2005) findings of cyclical patterns in fandom, as the fan engagement of this study's participants is characterized by endurance rather than cycles. The concept of cyclical fandom incorporates individual affections and involvement with a particular fan object, changing in cycles as a new, more appealing object is encountered (Hills, 2005). However, in this research, the participants never fully abandoned their *Harry Potter* fandom. Only one participant was no longer actively involved with the franchise, Michelle, but nevertheless considered herself a fan and did not reject fandom. The temporality of fan objects therefore only concerned new fan objects that participants

encountered occasionally, but none of these were comparable to *Harry Potter* for the participants. For other fan objects, such as One Direction in the case of Jane, participants spoke of "expiration dates" rather than long-term fan engagement. Thus, the concept of cyclical fandom, i.e., immersion in a fan object to the point of exhaustion and depletion, applies to the other temporal fan interests, but not to *Harry Potter* in this study (Hills, 2005).

#### **4.3.2 Differences between child- and adulthood**

Although all participants considered long-term engagement with *Harry Potter* to be an integral part of their lives, they also stated that they expressed their fandom differently, especially when comparing their childhood and adult fan activities. One of the main differences observed in the interview was that the majority of the participants' views on *Harry Potter* changed by being able to differentiate increasingly between reality and fantasy with age: "I used to believe that Voldemort would come through the window. Well, I don't believe that anymore. [...] You've kind of lost that childlike view" (Luisa). This also relates to the deepened knowledge acquired as an adult fan, such as knowing the end of the series or being able to take a look behind the scenes by visiting the filming locations, which was considered disenchanting to some extent: "And a part of that does take away like the magic and the fantasy of it all because I mean, ultimately it isn't real, but it's when you're younger, it feels so much more realistic" (Gina).

Another change all participants experienced due to their adult life responsibilities is having less time for *Harry Potter*, resulting in the franchise being less present in their adult lives than it was in their childhood. For instance, Amy (27, female, student, German) was less engaged with *Harry Potter* "when I was busy [...] with work". As a result, engagement with the franchise no longer takes place as much daily but is nevertheless present to some degree: "It's just growing up and you have more responsibilities, but it's always been there. Like it hasn't changed how much I love it" (Chiara). This finding resonates with age-related changes in fan identities as discussed by Harrington and Bielby (2010b). Reminiscent of their research, the transition from school to full-time employment or college was also observed as an important change in the present interviews, as all participants indicated that they were able to invest less time in their fan activities as they aged (Harrington & Bielby, 2010b). This is particularly evident in the types of fan activities participants engaged in as children and during adolescence compared to adulthood, as all participants experienced a shift from active to predominantly passive fan activities.

Although all participants have comparatively less time in their daily lives to engage with the franchise, they have more financial resources on the other hand. For example, a higher budget allowed two of the participants to attend the studio tour, which is something most participants only did as adults, or to purchase merchandise:

you might want to buy merchandise, or you've got means of travel. You go to like for example, the studio tours London and I think what really helps sort of solidify that fandom is that now you can do things in conjunction with obviously watching the films and reading the books. (Gina)

Although possessing fewer personal resources such as time, adulthood facilitates fan engagement through greater financial resources. Again, there are parallels to the literature on age-related changes in fandom: Harrington and Bielby (2010b), for example, cited the ability to drive a car as an adult and then travel to more distant fan events as a way to expand one's fandom through more opportunities as an adult.

### **4.3.3 Influences on identity and life**

As seen in the discussion of the differences between childhood and adulthood, all participants were exposed to *Harry Potter* at a young age. Therefore, influences on both their identity and life trajectory were identified in the interviews. First, an important part of all participants' relationship with *Harry Potter* was their first exposure to it as children, having been introduced to the franchise either by family or childhood friends. This finding is reminiscent of Harrington and Bielby's (2010a) study of long-term fans of soap operas, as they also found that people became long-term fans after being introduced to a fan object by family members, usually in childhood. Therefore, *Harry Potter* offers participants a way to return to their childhood. All participants express nostalgic feelings when talking about *Harry Potter*, suggesting an underlying reason why *Harry Potter* is such an enduring franchise for participants. According to Gina, she might not have formed such a strong and consistent relationship with *Harry Potter* if she had first encountered it later in her life, as now it "holds a special place in my heart because obviously it's tied to some childhood memories". According to Harrington and Bielby (2010a), the first encounter with *Harry Potter* as a child is important for one's identity and life trajectory, as development is seen as a cumulative process. This touches upon another important finding in this research, namely the establishment of parasocial relationships to the characters by seeing them as role models. Given all participants were of a similar age to the characters when they first engaged with the

original series, they perceived themselves as growing up with the characters, enabling a strong identification with the characters. As Isaac explains here:

Well, I think I was eight when I saw it, and they were eleven in the film, which means it was somehow still so similar, children who went to school, to be honest, so you can always identify with that a bit.

Hence, for Isaac there was a feeling of connectedness due to what the characters were living through. For the female participants in particular, characters like Hermione were important role models growing up. For Maxine, for example, Hermione helped her understand girls can be smart and hardworking too, which was especially important to her considering the culture she grew up in:

Well, for Hermione, I think that she is a very good representative of girls wanting to study well, wanting to obey the laws, but also wanting to be good friends to other people. [...] In Vietnam, [...] girls [...] should not be studying too well. [...] She should not pursue higher education or else no one would want to marry her. [...] And I think that having Hermione [...] as the nerd of the group [...] is a very fun thing to do. Very beneficial for all the girls.

This quote highlights not only the importance of role models like Hermione for girls in general, which was mentioned by all female participants, but in Maxine's specific case also in the context of her nationality and culture. For her, the portrayal of Hermione broke not only with general female stereotypes, but especially with Vietnamese stereotypes in this regard.

In addition to this recognition described by Maxine, another interesting finding in this context was that all participants found value in almost all main characters and struggled on who inspired them the most or who they related to the most. Such parasocial relationships with the characters are considered essential to the success of *Harry Potter* in the literature (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011). Due to the long development of the plot as well as growing up with the characters and being able to identify with them as they go through similar life phases as oneself, it is an important part of the participants' fan engagement (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011; Williams, 2018a; Petersen, 2018). Since the original series spans seven books and eight films, all participants were able to emotionally empathize with the characters, reminiscent of Petersen's (2018) research. Therefore, *Harry Potter* provides continuity in participants' lives. Even after the release of the final installment of the original series, eleven out of the twelve participants were able to prolong their fandom by re-reading or re-watching, allowing them to connect to their childhood as discussed (Petersen, 2018; Williams 2018a). This insight might further explain why participants see *Harry Potter* as such a constant and incomparable fan

object as explained earlier. Moreover, it resonates with the literature on life course fandom, more specifically, one of the two facets of fandom related to the concept of life course transitions: self-narrativization (Harrington et al., 2011). Because the characters in *Harry Potter* are role models for the majority of the participants, the self and one's identity become connected to the fictional. Primarily because of the closeness to age, most of the participants were able to identify with various characters from *Harry Potter* and were influenced in their identity due to trying to adopt values of the characters (Harrington et al., 2011). In addition to identifying with the characters and actors, eight participants also identified with the houses. These participants either took tests to be sorted into houses, or they simply identified with and chose a particular house based on their values. The values of the houses then, in turn, served as a guide for the participants growing up: “I would sometimes, like, take the Pottermore quiz and like hope I would get Gryffindor and I guess I would try to emulate their qualities, like just the bravery, the intelligence, being there for your friends” (Phoebe). Furthermore, *Harry Potter* not only provides role models for children, but also other role models when growing up as Luisa mentions:

And the older I got, the more I discover myself in other characters, of course. This loving nature of Sirius Black I see [...] with my kids that I coach, playing basketball. [...] A lot of people just accompany Harry on their journey as kind of mentors and that's where I see myself too.

Identification with older characters in adulthood, like Luisa describes, is reminiscent of Harrington et al.'s (2011) suggestion that fan self-narratives based on fictional characters adapt and change with age, as fictional role models may change based on appropriateness for fans' ages.

Additionally, about half of the participants saw it as unique that the actors also grew up on screen and did not change during the films, as this rarely happens in the film industry. By seeing the actors grow up, some of the participants also formed a parasocial relationship with the actors: “you see the actors from such a young age that they almost become friends of yours, [...] it's really a long period of time where you grow up with them and can fully identify with them” (Jane). This is different in some respects from Schmid and Klimmt (2011) and Tribe et al. (2021), who suggest that these parasocial relationships primarily involve the characters, rather than the actors behind them. Seeing the actors as friends was also a point where the participants expressed different opinions, as many participants associate the actors closely with the characters. Isaac reflects on this as follows:

But for me, these actors are really very mainly the characters and not the people behind them, unfortunately for them. That is, if I were to follow Daniel Radcliffe right now, I don't even want to see what kind of movie he's in. That's Harry Potter for me. Isaac relates this to his long-term involvement with *Harry Potter* and growing up with the characters rather than the actors themselves. Because he strongly associates the actors with the characters from *Harry Potter*, he finds it difficult to imagine the actors in other roles or even as their own personalities. For this reason, he even avoids other movies with the actors and does not want to know anything about them as individuals to maintain his imagination.

Furthermore, growing up with *Harry Potter* has influenced all participants' life courses and life goals. For example, three of the participants stated that they wanted to become writers at a younger age because of *Harry Potter*. Lewis even became a published writer due to being inspired by the story of *Harry Potter*. Luisa did not become a writer as envisioned as a child, but she was nonetheless influenced by *Harry Potter* in her career choice and now works in the film industry:

I don't think I would have gone in this whole creative direction without Harry Potter, because that's what shaped me the most in my life. [...] That influenced my path into the creative industry the most [...] because that world is just so awesome and so amazingly written and has so, so many amazing people. [...] I wanted to pass that on, that excitement in other films, in other series, in other writing as well.

For both Luisa and Lewis, the *Harry Potter* fandom therefore had a significant impact on their life paths, as their encounter with *Harry Potter* influenced them in their career choices. Furthermore, two of the participants, Lewis and Jennifer, attributed Harry Potter to have helped them improve their English skills. Jennifer explains: "I grew up half Dutch, [...] half English. And my writing was always quite poor. [...] And once I started reading the Harry Potter books, it also kind of pushed me to read more English". Therefore, in these cases specifically, being a *Harry Potter* fan can be seen as an important milestone affecting a next step in their life course (Harrington & Bielby, 2010b), such as their professional career, but also certain skills that they did not have before due to their nationality, such as improving their English skills considering it was not their native language.

Another main influence observed in the interviews in this regard is that all participants attribute part of their imagination and creativity to their early encounter with *Harry Potter*. This stems from *Harry Potter* encouraging participants to imagine a new world: "it's so creative and pushed the boundaries and like, the way I thought, like creatively" (Jennifer). Thus, all participants acknowledged having been influenced by *Harry Potter* in some way,

albeit subtly, in terms of their identity. This again indicates *Harry Potter* being an important milestone in the participants' lives, as joining the *Harry Potter* fan community has influenced all the participants' identities to some extent (Harrington & Bielby, 2010b). In this context, the majority of participants attribute an imaginative side to their identity to having been exposed to *Harry Potter* from a young age.

Moreover, all participants also talked about how *Harry Potter* changed the way they connect with others, as it opened new topics of conversation and, in some cases, made it easier for participants to connect with strangers, simply by virtue of them also being fans: “I feel like it made me less shy, maybe about making friends” (Chiara). Therefore, *Harry Potter* is seen by all the participants as a basis for friendships, relationships, and social connections in general. Lewis and Nadine, for example, became friends through their fan activities online: “I met a very good friend that I would be friends for, like, around ten years [...] He's a real friend and I have been part of his life” (Nadine).

Seven of the twelve participants also talked about how *Harry Potter* allowed for meaningful relationships within the family, especially if they were introduced to the series through family. All participants also see these family relationships through *Harry Potter* in the future, as they all spoke of wanting to pass the books or films on to their children to keep the franchise alive. Thus, *Harry Potter* is not only a steady aspect in the participants' past and present, albeit less present in some life phases than others, but is also considered important by all participants for their future: “If I do have kids, [...] I would love to present it to them” (Chiara).

Finally, *Harry Potter* had an impact on three of the participants' lives by helping them get through difficult times and accept themselves through offering them a sense of belonging. Nadine, for example, recalled how much *Harry Potter* had helped her by providing relatable characters:

I was like the bullied girl at school. [...] Because when I was 14 years old, [...] what you could see at TV, for example, was the super blonde girl having lots of money and being super popular, right? Like in *Clueless* or *High School Musical*. And if you weren't like the main character of those stories, you actually felt really bad. But when you start reading *Harry Potter*, you could find yourself in there somewhere, right? [...] And I think that gave me, like a safe place to be. (Nadine)

As for Nadine, *Harry Potter* and its fandom gave her a place where she felt she belonged and, as a result, influenced her personally to a significant degree as it fostered her gain confidence

in herself. This sense of belonging created by *Harry Potter* is further related to the sub-theme "escapism/refuge" discussed in the following subsection.

#### **4.3.4 Escapism and personal refuge**

All the participants talked about *Harry Potter* being a world that they can dive into and find comfort in when not feeling well. The ability to immerse themselves as much into the world of *Harry Potter* gave the participants comfort, as they connected *Harry Potter* with positive feelings. As Amy explains, it is her "go to movie when I'm feeling down". Similarly, Luisa used *Harry Potter* to comfort herself in difficult and stressful situations. She remembers when being afraid of something as a child, she would resort to *Harry Potter* for comfort. For instance, she would think about stories that would calm her, when going away from her family for vacation with friends: "I imagined a lot that I was in this world to escape this homesickness, because then you're at boarding school and it's great to be there" (Luisa). Even today, she views *Harry Potter* as her personal refuge, even more so than she did as a child. Isaac also talked about *Harry Potter* being a refuge for him as a child and as an adult: "when you watched the movies or read the books, it was a bit like a safe zone, like a safe spot, because you felt at ease watching it". Seeing *Harry Potter* as a place of refuge to escape from reality highlights how the participants feel secure due to *Harry Potter*, which resonates with Sandvoss' (2005) previous research in which he describes fandoms as a home for fans: "fans in different fields of popular culture often refer to their fandom in terms of 'emotional warmth' or a sense of security and stability, which in turn are associated with *Heimat*" (p. 64).

Furthermore, it is important to understand why this was the case for so many of the participants. Eleven of the twelve participants explained this strong immersion into the world of *Harry Potter* by the good and detailed writing of the books as well as the long build-up of the story as it allowed for a deep connection: "There's so many details you can just latch on to and so many hero narratives you can get lost in. And I think that was what caught me" (Jennifer). Furthermore, *Harry Potter* does not only provide one specific story but there is a whole world build around it, which most participants saw as special, and which allowed them to get lost in that world. Due to the continuous storyline, there is a lot of content to immerse oneself in. In addition, the described world of *Harry Potter* is new and unknown, however, it is not too different from the real world, as there are many relatable topics due to the coming-of-age nature of the story. This relatability allowed nine of the participants to immerse themselves even more, because they relate to the story and characters as the fantasy is not too far from the own reality, as touched upon before: "we all went to school, we all had problems

with teachers. [...] We've all had conflicts with friends, um, having a crush for the first time” (Amy). Therefore, the described escapism is further encouraged through a strong fascination for the whole world of *Harry Potter*. This, in turn, encourages certain fan activities, as the participants want to live *Harry Potter* experiences. This desire ranges from playing video games where one is a student at Hogwarts to specifically travelling to London for the *Harry Potter* studio tour. As Luisa illustrates:

I went all the way to London just to see these Warner Studios. I really wanted to see that. And we did a Harry Potter tour through London once and [...] when I was in those studios for the first time, I cried because it was just so beautiful, and I definitely want to go there again.

Visiting the studio tour is something that three participants, like Luisa, have either done or which five of them described as a dream. Gina even visited the studio multiple times: “I have been three times. I'm most likely going to go again”. This highlights the importance of connected physical places that fans can visit, as they reinforced the previously explained feelings of security by allowing fans to also immerse physically into the world of *Harry Potter*, reminiscent of both Sandvoss' (2005) and Williams' (2018b) research. As these places are part of official marketing activities, this connects well to the discussion of the following and final main theme, “Critical towards new content/marketing”.

#### **4.4 Critical towards new content and marketing**

Due to the participants' long engagement with the franchise, they also expressed critical and sometimes even defensive opinions towards new releases and marketing activities of the *Wizarding World*. First, all participants view the original *Harry Potter* series as complete and perfect. Due to this opinion on the original series, most of the participants were critical towards new releases such as *Fantastic Beasts*: “with the new movies, for example, I have this like core idea of the original series, and I like that and I'm really happy with that. [...] So, for me, [...] it's too new” (Amy). Similarly, for Lewis, the original *Harry Potter* movies “are like the masterpieces that can't be replaced even after several tries”. Comments like these once again emphasize the uniqueness of the franchise for all participants, as previously discussed. They also illustrate the high expectations all participants have for new content related to the series. Due to seeing the original series as complete as all the participants do, many of them see new releases only as making more money from the success of *Harry Potter*, as they believe new releases cannot match the quality of the original series: “It bugs me a little bit, too. This money-making with Harry Potter, [...] *Fantastic Beasts*, Dumbledore's

Secrets here and there, that's money-making" (Luisa). The majority of the participants furthermore voiced their dislike of the new *Fantastic Beasts* series, as they feel protective over the original story due to their long familiarity with it: "Maybe it's also that you're so used to the way the story is, [...] and when something just cuts into [...] this familiarity, that you then become so defensive" (Isaac). This familiarity with the original series further complicates it for the participants to connect with newly introduced characters and new sides shown of the *Wizarding World*, as Lewis puts it: "I'm not able to connect with the Wizarding World shown into this *Fantastic Beasts* series".

Furthermore, *Fantastic Beasts* is seen by five of the interview participants as a separate franchise from *Harry Potter*, as they are missing a link to the original story: "I don't really associate them that much with each other" (Amy). The strong dislike of *Fantastic Beasts* can be explained using the concept of cyclical fandom, which assumes that cyclical patterns of fan activity can be driven by changing fan preferences (Hills, 2005; Booth, 2018). The majority participants liked the first film in the *Fantastic Beasts* series but disliked the subsequent films due to plot changes or even the change of actor Johnny Depp as one of the main characters. This caused some of the participants to reject the films further due to feeling betrayed by the plotlines, a finding reminiscent of Booth's (2018) research. On the other hand, a minority of the participants liked the new story of *Fantastic Beasts*, or at least in parts, due to new perspectives and being able to immerse into the world again, like Gina explains: "It's a really good way of kind of staying engaged because it gives you a bit of a wide understanding of the history of Harry Potter".

Moreover, even though many participants voiced a strong dislike of the *Fantastic Beasts* series, they nevertheless stayed engaged with the world of *Harry Potter* through the new series. This resonates with the emotional and affective nature of being a fan, as described in the fan literature by, for example, Busse (2018) and Harrington et al. (2011): Fans are emotionally attached to an object, which can be both love and hate. Although some fans expressed a strong dislike for the *Fantastic Beasts* films, they still watch the films out of loyalty or curiosity, for example Nadine who says: "I'm pretty loyal. [...] I went to watch all the *Fantastic Beasts* movies and I bought and read the English version of *The Cursed Child*" As this interview quote touches upon, the same applies to the theatrical release *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, which was mostly liked for the closely related content of the story and that it is a continuation of the original story rather than a prequel such as *Fantastic Beasts*. However, the format was not well received by six of the participants. For instance, Michelle did not like *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, as she comments: "I think I just didn't find it

that captivating. It was written as a play, wasn't it?". Furthermore, the recent reunion of the cast was important to most of the participants, which they felt very emotional about, even though some participants were disappointed by the concept of the reunion. Luisa reminisces:

I didn't think it would be so interview heavy and so disillusioning. I really thought that they would bring out a film now. And somehow it wasn't like that! It was a mixture of I don't really know. So, I thought the concept didn't really work, to be honest.

Although it touched me anyway, when Emma Watson and someone or something recounts, then I already cry anyway.

Even though new releases and content are received with mixed feelings by the majority of the participants, they are nonetheless important in retaining fans in the franchise given the participants' emotional response to them. This is crucial, as “affect is at the core of both fan and anti-fan experiences” as explained earlier (Harrington et al., 2011, p. 577). Whether disliking the films strongly, watching them out of loyalty, or really liking the new releases, the releases provided a new basis for discussion and engagement within the fan community. In addition, all participants expressed enthusiasm for closely related content such as video games or merchandise including Hogwarts school books or wands as another way to engage. These are important new insights adding to the presented theory and are particularly relevant for the practical implications of marketing.

## 5 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the long-term commitment of fans to the *Harry Potter* series and to find out how fans give meaning to their own fan engagement. More specifically, the research interest focused on why fans remain loyal over the long term, but also on how their fan engagement develops or changes over time. To this end, the research question *How do fans give meaning to their long-term commitment to the Harry Potter franchise?* was formulated.

### 5.1 Key findings and its theoretical implications

The analysis of the interviews revealed four main themes, as elaborated upon in the results section of this thesis. In combination with the literature at hand, these themes provided valuable insights for answering the research question of this thesis. First, it became apparent that the research participants' fan activities were mainly passive. All participants mostly enjoyed learning more about *Harry Potter* by re-reading or re-watching the original series, but also through other fan content such as podcasts or fan fiction. The research findings illustrative a strong significance of re-reading or re-watching the original material of *Harry Potter*, which is reminiscent of previous research on fan activities by, for instance, Jenkins (1992) and Sullivan (2020a). Furthermore, this research illustrated how the participants' fan activities shifted from active in childhood to more passive activities in adulthood, reminiscent to Harrington and Bielby's (2010b) age-related changes in fandom. In a similar vein to what Harrington and Bielby (2010b) discussed, the study demonstrated while fans on the one hand experienced having less time for their fan activities due to other life responsibilities with age, they on the other hand also experienced being able to participate in a variety of new fan activities due to a higher budget than they had as children. In this research, the most frequent named example of fan activities facilitated in adulthood due to financial resources was attending the *Harry Potter* studio tour in London.

In addition, negative experiences, including judgment from outside the fandom, peer pressure within the fandom, as well as disappointment in author J. K. Rowling, led many participants to shift their fan activities to more private and passive activities. That the negative experiences of the participants not only included external judgement of the fandom but also internal judgment within the fandom for lack of knowledge, for instance, is to some extent contrary to what Sandvoss (2005) previously suggested, being that fan communities offer a safe space of fan expression without judgment. However, one of the most important findings in this context was that the participants never gave up and would never give up their

commitment to *Harry Potter* despite their negative experiences. Moreover, easy access to content through digitization and confrontation with content through social media algorithms encouraged the participants to become more actively engaged again, something that previous studies also showed (Bennet, 2018; Sundet & Petersen, 2021). Furthermore, even though most participants indicated that they tended to engage passively and individually in private fan activities, they still saw the sociality of the fan community as an important continuation factor, as they would like to occasionally share their passion with other fans, especially with their families and close friends. This role of the social aspect of being a fan in maintaining fandom over the long-term is discussed in a similar manner by various previous studies (Jenkins, 1992; Sullivan, 2020a; Sandvoss, 2005; Driessen, 2015; Sundet & Petersen, 2021), which in relation to this study underscores its considerable significance.

Considering the described influences on the participants' fandom, a notable finding in this research was the constant nature of all participants' *Harry Potter* fandom, even if intermittently more or less engaged, especially in relation to the concept of cyclical fandom (Hills, 2005). All participants never tired of their *Harry Potter* fandom or moved on to another fan object. This was explained by the strong and long-term attachment to the franchise, as all participants first encountered the franchise at a young age, leading to a feeling of continuity, which resonates with Driessen's (2018) conceptualization of perpetual fandom. Uniquely to this study, the temporality suggested by cyclical fandom applied mainly to other fan objects some participants became invested in on occasion, rendering *Harry Potter* the only enduring fan object in the participants' lives. This again is explainable by all the participants' emotional, long-term attachment to the franchise. Although all participants experienced waves of their *Harry Potter* engagement in terms of a cyclical fandom (Hills, 2005), they never completely abandoned the *Harry Potter* fandom, indicating an enduring fandom, intermittently in the background of the participants' lives.

The participants' involvement with *Harry Potter* from a young age on yielded insights into how the fandom influenced the participants' identities and life trajectories. For example, the participants attributed certain character traits, such as fantasy and creativity, to their engagement as *Harry Potter* fans. In addition, two of the participants were influenced by *Harry Potter* in their career choices, again highlighting the influence the *Harry Potter* fandom had on them personally. These findings highly resonate with previous studies on long-term fan engagement, especially concerning life course fandom as well as parasocial aspects of fandom (Harrington & Bielby, 2010a; Harrington & Bielby, 2010b; Schmid & Klimmt, 2011; Williams, 2018a; Petersen, 2018; Harrington et al., 2011; Tribe et al., 2021). Beyond that, all

participants attributed a comforting role to *Harry Potter* in their lives, as they return to *Harry Potter* when they feel unwell, allowing them to escape their daily lives and stress, resonating with Sandvoss' (2005) description of fandom as home, a warm and secure place.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the participants' meaning-giving process this thesis seeks to understand is characterized by several dimensions represented by the main patterns of analysis. These themes are valuable in answering the research question of this thesis *How do fans give meaning to their long-term commitment to the Harry Potter series?* First, part of answering this question is that an important aspect of the participants' fandom is their strong connection to their childhood through *Harry Potter*. Because of their longstanding connection to the franchise, all participants see their fan engagement as a constant aspect of their lives, both in the present and in the future, as they all want to pass the books and movies on to their own children. Although participants may see their engagement with *Harry Potter* as more or less intense at certain stages in their lives, they still attribute an enduring role to it in their lives interwoven with their own life trajectories: participants give meaning to their long engagement with *Harry Potter* by acknowledging the impact it has had on their lives, such as influencing their identity and interests, which in turn has influenced their life course thus far. This is also related to the finding that all participants consider *Harry Potter* to be their personal refuge during stressful times, rendering it a unique fan object for them compared to others in that it offers them as much stability and comfort. Another way in which the participants made sense of their fan engagement with the franchise was that they all acknowledged certain influences, both negative and positive, on their fandom, demonstrating that their fan engagement is not fixed but dynamic, changing and adapting to life situations and age, for example. Furthermore, all participants understand their fan engagement as rather passive, with the exception of two participants. Nevertheless, the participants considered themselves as dedicated fans, just passive in their activities. This underscores the broad definition of fan engagement and that long-term fan engagement for the participants does not necessarily imply always being very active in the fan community. In addition, the participants feel very protective of *Harry Potter* because of their long emotional connection to it, especially regarding new releases and marketing activities. This may result in practical implications, as discussed in the next subsection.

## **5.2 Practical implications for marketing**

In terms of marketing activities, participants seemingly offered strong indications of what they liked and disliked about these strategies. In the case of new releases such as the *Fantastic Beasts* movies, the participants mainly criticized plot holes in the storyline as well as a lack of connection to the original series, as new characters were introduced due to the movie being set in a time before the original *Harry Potter* series. Besides, most participants did not like it when merchandise or releases were too far removed from the original series. All participants emphasized that they like activities and merchandise closely related to the original world of *Harry Potter*, allowing them to be more immersed in it and even physically experience it, such as the studio tour. This was strongly related to the previous explained finding, that the participants connect the fandom with emotional warmth and security (Sandvoss, 2005), something which is further encouraged through closely connected merchandise and fan activities. In particular, the opportunity to visit the *Harry Potter* studio tour was cited as an important asset to their fandom, as most participants have either already done it or dream of doing it someday. Therefore, when planning future marketing activities, a close connection to the original series should be ensured. Merchandising items such as wands or books featured in the movies that could be purchased, for example, were received with enthusiasm by the majority of the participants. Overall, most participants expressed a strong attraction to such merchandise items.

## **5.3 Limitations and further research**

Some limitations were encountered during the research process. Limitations arose, for instance, in context of the internationality of the participants and the related decision to conduct online interviews. During these online interviews, some difficulties occurred. For example, some of the interviews encountered connectivity disconnections, which disrupted the natural flow of the interview. Additionally, while online interviews over Zoom offered more flexibility as no valuable time is spent on traveling to the interview location (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), limitations due to time differences occurred due to the international sample: time differences between different countries had to be considered, rendering it more difficult to find time slots convenient for both the interviewee and the interviewer.

Furthermore, the opportunity of the global sample was not fully exploited in this research, as only small differences and influences related to nationalities were encountered. Only three of the participants were found to experience differences or influences in their fandom related to their nationality. Lewis and Jennifer, for instance, were influenced by

*Harry Potter* in learning and improving their English skills. Maxine, on the other hand, was influenced by the character of Hermione in that she wanted to be diligent in some way, which she explained was unusual for girls in Vietnam, where she grew up.

Lastly, other limitations included finding a balanced research sample. As explained in the methodology section of this thesis, the sample consisted of ten female participants and only two male participants. In this research, the only main gender-related outcome explored in this study was Hermione's characteristic of being industrious and independent as something all female participants saw as important and influential in their own life courses. A more balanced research sample including more male participants might have offered more insights into male-related fan activities. In addition, seven participants were 23 years old, thereby rendering the sample unbalanced in terms of age as well. However, no major differences in fan expressions based on the age of the participants were observed in this research.

These minor differences illustrate that despite nationality, age, and gender, all participants shared similar experiences, highlighting that being a *Harry Potter* fan is being part of a global community experiencing common phenomena and speaking a global language, namely English. Therefore, in further research, it would be interesting to pay more attention to age, gender, nationality as well as cultural settings of fans and how it influences their fandom in connection to another fan object than *Harry Potter*, as no findings of great relevance were found for this franchise. Furthermore, since this study strongly emphasized the significance of the social aspects of being a fan and belonging to a fan community, future research on long-term fandom using, for example, focus groups as an approach to methodology would be of great interest to also explore interacting social dynamics between fans firsthand.

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## Appendix A. Participants

	Age	Gender	Education	Residence	Nationality	Occupation
Amy	27	female	Master student	Germany	German	Student
Luisa	23	female	Bachelor graduate	Germany	German	Employee in film funding / production
Chiara	23	female	Master student	Netherlands	Brazilian/ Italian	Student
Gina	23	female	Bachelor graduate	UK	English	Employee in an insurance company
Isaac	25	male	Bachelor student	Germany	German	Student, Social Media Content Manager
Jennifer	23	female	Master student	Netherlands	Dutch / Vietnamese	Student
Jane	23	female	Master student	Portugal	German	Student, social media manager of an NGO
Lewis	30	male		India	Indian	Associate analyst
Michelle	22	female	Master student	Netherlands	German	Student, HR intern
Maxine	23	female		Vietnam	Vietnamese	Part-time employed
Nadine	29	female		Chile	Chilean	English teacher
Phoebe	23	female	Master student	Ireland	US-American	Student

## Appendix B. Coding frame

The following coding frame introduces all main themes, sub-themes, and codes by defining them. The coding frame is structured in such a way that the main theme is presented first and subsequently the sub-themes, if applicable, and the codes of each main theme are discussed.

Sub-theme	Code	Definition
<p><b>Passive rather than active engagement:</b> This main theme refers to the activities mentioned by the participants, which showed a strong pattern of more passive and, in this context, individual fan activities than active and communal fan activities.</p>		
	Passive fan activities	This code refers to passive fan activities such as reading or watching the series.
	Active fan activities	This code refers to active fan activities such as writing fan fiction or running a fan page.
	Individual fan activities	This code refers to participants taking part in private and individual fan activities.
	Communal fan activities	This code refers to respondents who participate in joint fan activities with other fans or friends and family.
<p><b>Influences on fandom:</b> This main theme relates to various influences that participants experienced on their own fandom. These influences include both factors that encouraged the continuation of their fandom and factors that led to less active fan engagement.</p>		
	(Re-) engagement through social media/Digitality	This code points to social media and digital as strong influences on participants' engagement with the franchise. Social media exposed them to more content through the algorithm. Digitality in general made it easier to search for information and access original material, such as movies on streaming platforms.
	Sociality as continuation factor	This code refers to the sociality of fandom as an influence on one's own fandom, i.e., the community surrounding the Harry Potter series. This includes online fan communities as well as closer social communities such as friends or family also engaged with the Harry Potter series.
Negative fan experiences		This sub-theme refers to various negative experiences encountered by the participants in their fandom, in turn influencing their fan activities.

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Judgment about fandom	This code refers to external judgments about the participants' fandom. Such judgments may come from people who do not understand adult fandom but may also refer to judgments made earlier in life.
Fights/fan pressure and extremes	This code refers to negative feelings within the fandom, including feeling pressured by other fans about knowing everything, or the experience of being ostracized by other fans for not reading the books, for example. It also refers to the extremes of fandom.
Disappointment in J.K. Rowling	This sub-theme concerns participants' reactions to the controversy regarding author Rowling, primarily consisting of disappointment with her as a person.
Struggle acknowledging her work	This code refers to the struggle experienced by the participants regarding Rowling's work, as on one hand they felt that new releases should come from her as she envisioned the world as it is, but on the other hand they do not want to continue to support her financially by purchasing new releases.
Strongly decreasing fascination for Rowling	All participants described a fascination with Rowling in their childhood that is now greatly diminishing due to the controversy surrounding her. This code refers to all text excerpts concerning this decreasing fascination.
Separating story from author	This code refers to the participants' need to distance themselves from Rowling. Participants expressed that they needed to separate the story of Harry Potter from her as an author to continue their fandom.
<b>Intertwining long-term fandom and life course:</b> This main theme refers to how participants' fan engagement is intertwined with their life course and how it may differ from one life stage to another. Additionally, the theme refers to how the intertwining of participants' fandom with their life course has influenced them in some way, i.e., in their identity.	
Constant in fan phases	This code refers to this long-term continuity of fandom. All participants saw their involvement with Harry Potter as an integral part of their lives, extending into their future by, for example, giving it to their children.
Differences between	Through prolonged exposure to Harry Potter, participants also experienced changes between being a child and an adult, which this sub-theme relates to.

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child- and  
adulthood

Loss of childish view      This code refers to participants as adults seeing more behind the scenes of Harry Potter and being able to distinguish it from reality more than they could as children.

Less present due to life responsibilities      All participants expressed their fandom was less present in their daily lives, mainly due to commitments such as work or studying, leaving them with less time for their fandom, which this code refers to.

Budget as adult      Unlike the other codes in this subtopic, this code refers to the fact that adulthood allows for more fan activities due to a higher budget, such as going to the Warner Bros Studio Tour.

Influences on identity and life

Due to long-term fan engagement, various influences on participants' identities and lives were observed, which this sub-theme addresses.

Basis for social connections      This code refers to how fandom changed the social relationships of participants, as it allowed for the building and intensification of friendships based on a shared passion or simply a topic of conversation.

Sense of belonging/acceptance      This code refers to participants feeling accepted within the fandom because the community provided them with a place to belong based on similar interests and not being judged for those interests.

Reconnect to childhood      This code refers to the Harry Potter fandom allowing participants to connect to their childhood, as participants first encountered the series as children and therefore have many memories associated with it.

Parasocial relationships to characters      Because participants were at similar stages in their lives as the characters when they read or watched the series, they experienced growing up with the characters in some ways, allowing them to see them both as friends and as role models, which is what this code refers to.

Parasocial relationships to actors      This code refers to the characters' actors growing up on screen as well, since none of the main characters' actors have

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	been replaced, thus also enabling a parasocial relationship with the actors.
Influence on life goals	This code refers to how the fascination influenced some of the participants in their life goals and choices, i.e., the inspiration to become writers as well.
Source of own fantasy/creativity	This code refers to the character trait that most participants mentioned when talking about being influenced by Harry Potter: the ability to imagine a world and grow creatively from it.
Identification with houses	This code also refers to participants viewing the houses as role models, as Hogwarts students were placed in the houses based on traits the participants aspired towards.
(subtle) part of personality	This code refers to all participants admitting to being influenced by Harry Potter and seeing it as a subtle part of their personality.
Escapism and personal refuge	The lives of the participants are also heavily intertwined with the Harry Potter fandom, as it is a safe space to retreat to, which is what this sub-theme refers to.
Immersion through quality & consistency	This code refers to how the continuous nature of the original Harry Potter series, consisting of seven books and eight films, provided a strong immersion in the fantasy world. Moreover, participants attributed their escape into this world to Rowling's good and engaging writing style.
Relatable fantasy	This code refers to how escapism was facilitated by the fact that Harry Potter, although a fantasy world, can still be associated with real world elements, such as struggling with teachers, that participants also experienced and could relate to themselves.
Getting lost through fascination of world	This code refers to the fact that the participants were strongly fascinated by the whole world around Harry Potter and everything to be discovered in it, which influenced their escapism.
Comforting safe zone	This code refers to all participants describing comforting feelings related to Harry Potter and viewing it as a safe place. These feelings of comfort promoted escapism.

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**Critical towards new content and marketing:** This main theme summarizes the participants' opinions on new content of the Wizarding World and marketing, which they were critical of for various reasons.

Staying engaged through new releases	This code refers to the ways in which participants stayed connected to Harry Potter through the new releases, even if they liked or disliked them, as they provided a new basis for discussion within the fandom.
Perfect/completeness of original (book) series	This code refers to all participants considering the original Harry Potter franchise to be perfect and complete, leading them to have very high expectations for new releases and believing that nothing can come close to the original.
Money making/milking Harry Potter	This code refers to the participants being annoyed by new releases and marketing because they see it as a way to unnecessarily expand the franchise in order to make more money from it.
No connection to Fantastic Beasts	This code refers to the participants feeling no connection to the new series Fantastic Beasts, as it is set before Harry Potter and therefore hardly any of the popular characters appear. Because of this lack of connection, participants tend to see the series as a separate franchise.
Attractiveness of closely connected merchandise	This code refers to how much participants valued merchandise and activities that were closely related to the original Harry Potter story and met their high expectations.

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## Appendix C. Consent Form

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

<b>Project Title</b>	Master thesis: The captivating magic of fandoms: a qualitative study about long-term fan engagement with the Harry Potter franchise.
<b>Name of Principal Investigator</b>	Henriette Nöthel
<b>Name of Organisation</b>	Erasmus University Rotterdam
<b>Name of Sponsor</b>	/
<b>Purpose of the Study</b>	This research is being conducted as part of a master's thesis. I am inviting you to participate in this research project about the Harry Potter fandom. The purpose of this research project is to investigate how fans make meaning of their long-term engagement with the Harry Potter franchise.
<b>Procedures</b>	<p>You will participate in an interview lasting between approximately 45 to 60 minutes. You will be asked questions about your personal fan engagement with Harry Potter. Sample questions include: "What do you like about being a Harry Potter fan? "</p> <p>You must be at least 18 years old.</p>
<b>Potential and anti-cipated Risks and Discomforts</b>	There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time.
<b>Potential Benefits</b>	Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results to you.
<b>Sharing the results</b>	If wished, the research findings based on your interview participation will be shared with you in August 2022 latest. The research findings will be shared more broadly with the supervisors of this thesis.

<p><b>Confidentiality</b></p>	<p>Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained research staff will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, results of this study will be made available to you upon request.</p> <p>As indicated above, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. Transcribed segments from the audio recordings may be used in published forms (e.g., journal articles and book chapters). In the case of publication, pseudonyms will be used. The audio recordings, forms, and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location in the researchers' offices or on the researchers password-protected computers and will be destroyed within ten years of the initiation of the study.</p>
<p><b>Compensation</b></p>	<p>/</p>
<p><b>Right to Withdraw and Questions</b></p>	<p>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalised or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</p> <p>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the primary investigator:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Henriette Nöthel 607800hn@student.eur.nl</p>
<p><b>Statement of Consent</b></p>	<p>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</p> <p>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</p>
<p><b>Audio recording</b> (if applicable)</p>	<p>I consent to have my interview audio recorded</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> no</p>
<p><b>Secondary use</b> (if applicable)</p>	<p>I consent to have the anonymised data be used for secondary analysis</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> yes</p>

	<input type="checkbox"/> no	
<b>Signature and Date</b>	<b>NAME PARTICIPANT</b>	<b>NAME PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR</b> Henriette Nöthel
	<b>SIGNATURE</b>	<b>SIGNATURE</b> <i>Henriette Nöthel</i>
	<b>DATE</b>	<b>DATE</b>

## **Appendix D. Topic list**

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### **Introduction / warm up**

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me! Today we're going to talk about the Harry Potter franchise and its fan base, and in particular about you as a fan and your fan activities. Before we get into the details, maybe we could introduce ourselves first. My name is Henriette, I'm 23 years old and I'm in the final stages of my master's degree in media and creative industries. Could you also tell me a little bit about yourself?

We're meeting today because you're a fan of Harry Potter, which is what we're going to talk about. What do you like about being a Harry Potter fan? What don't you like?

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### **Topic 1: Entry into fandom**

Can you describe your first encounter with Harry Potter and how you came to know the franchise?

Do you remember your reasons for joining the fan community?

For how long have you been a fan of Harry Potter? (How old were you?)

What does the fandom mean to you? / What does being part of the fan community mean to you?

Do you think you've ever influenced anyone to become a Harry Potter fan?

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### **Topic 2 a: Being a fan**

Could you describe in your own words what it means to be a fan of something? What do you think it takes to be a fan?

Why do you consider yourself a fan?

What does fandom mean in your life?

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## **Topic 2 b: The Harry Potter fandom**

What do you think is unique about Harry Potter?

What is it that makes the Harry Potter franchise as attractive to you? What about its fandom?

Would you consider yourself a fan of the whole Wizarding World or just of the original Harry Potter series?

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## **Topic 3: social media/sources of information/fan activities**

Have you read all the books and seen all the movies?

What kind of fan activities do you engage in? You've just told me about reading the books, watching the movies. Are there any other ways in which you express your fandom?

What are your main sources of information about Harry Potter?

What social media platforms do you use to look for content about Harry Potter?

Do you follow any of the actors, or JK Rowling on social media? Why?

What about following fellow fans on social media?

After having talked a little bit about your fan activities: Would you describe yourself as an active or passive fan?

Harry Potter fans are also known for their activism. Organizations like the Harry Potter Alliance, now called Fandom Forward, have been formed to advocate for LGBTQIA+ and gender equality. Have you ever had any contact with that part of the fan base? What role does that play for you?

What is your opinion about J.K. Rowling?

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## **Topic 4: Life course fandom**

Has being a fan of Harry Potter has affected you and your identity in any way, e.g., the characters resonating or being role models to you?

How present was Harry Potter in your life when you were younger? How is that different from today?

Have you ever compared yourself to the characters or aspired to be like them, why?  
How has growing up and the changes in life circumstances that come with it changed your relationship with Harry Potter? What if you wouldn't have been a fan?  
Do you think the fandom has changed in any way since you've been a part of it?  
How do you currently engage with the fandom? There aren't any new books, yet there are elements like the Wizarding World, or the spin-off series Fantastic Beasts. Do you also engage with these or rather re-read or -rewatch the original series?

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### **Topic 5: Cyclical fandom**

Have you ever had periods when you felt less connected as a fan to Harry Potter?  
Would you say that your commitment as a fan has changed over the years? Why do you think it has or hasn't changed?  
Have you ever been a fan of something else for which you put aside the Harry Potter fandom?  
What were your reasons for doing so? / What might make you want to leave the fandom?

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### **Conclusion**

Finally, I would like to ask you one last question: How do you see your relationship with Harry Potter and the entire franchise in the future?

Thank you very much for answering all of my questions! Do you yourself have any questions you'd like to ask before we end this interview?

## Appendix E. Call for participants

Exemplary message sent to a fan page on Facebook inviting to participate in the research:

